

INTO CHINA

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THE LAKE OF THE ROYAL CROCODILES

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DOCTOR'S CHILD

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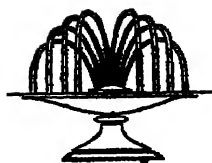
TIGER IN THE HEART



INTO CHINA

by

EILEEN BIGLAND



COLLINS

48 PALL MALL LONDON

THIS BOOK IS SET IN FONTANA, A NEW TYPE
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To
E. PIERRE CASSAGNOU

My Dear Cass,

Such a short time ago we sat in l'Hôpital Calmette, Kunming, discussing this book; since then our lives have suddenly altered and of necessity various changes have crept into this account of my Chinese journey.

But because I share your view that the significance of China's struggle for freedom in the East has been intensified rather than lessened by the present conflict in the West in which both our countries are engaged, the book remains basically as it was planned, a poor tribute to you who know so much more of China than I shall ever know.

Yours ever,

EILEEN.

LONDON, MARCH, 1940.

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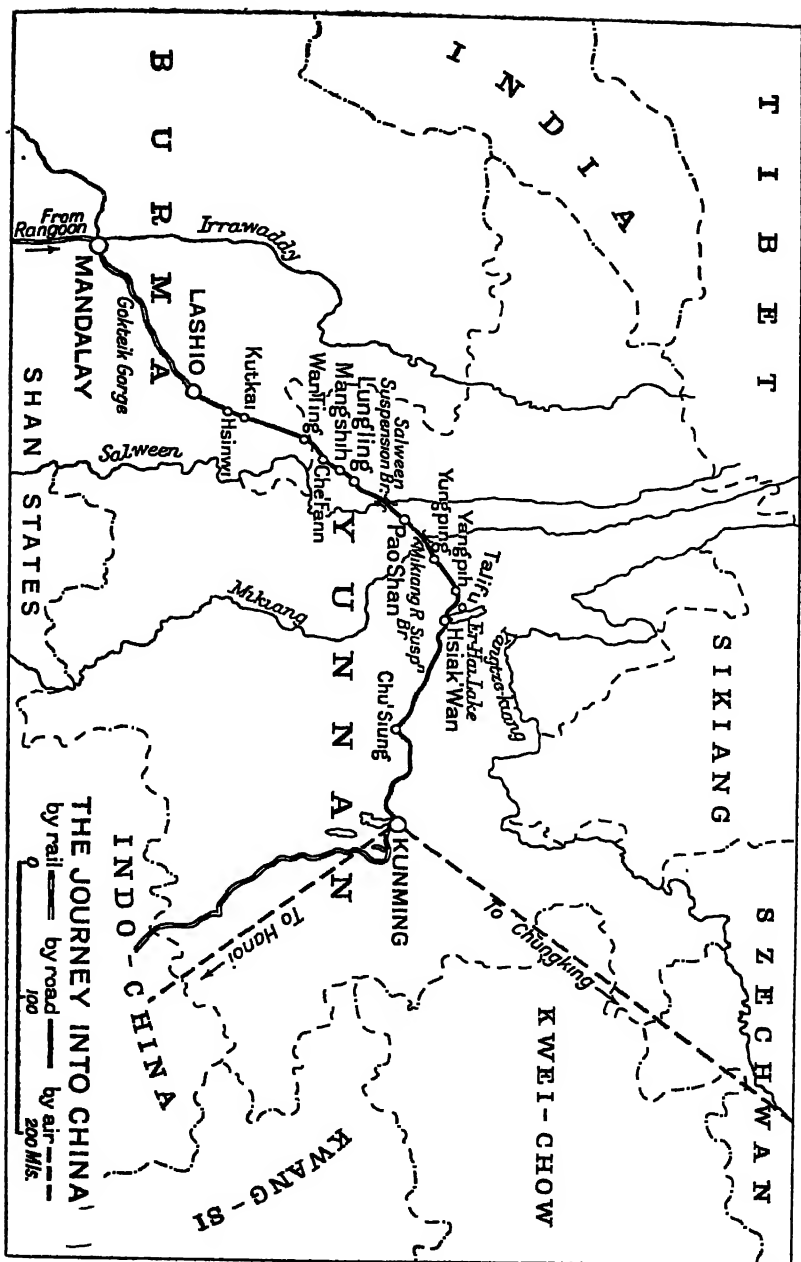
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Chapter One

PRELUDE IN RANGOON

I

I ARRIVED in Rangoon full of high hope, for had not wise people at home assured me that here I should be able to make all arrangements for my journey into China by the Yunnan-Burma Highway? But the city greeted me sadly. Beyond the muddy sullen river the rain swept down, a grey veil which blurred the golden roofs of the Shwe Dagon pagoda, and as I stepped ashore to have my passport stamped by a burly Scots policeman and was welcomed by a warm Glasgow accent somehow hope of China dwindled and I had the idea that if I turned my head I should look out, not over Rangoon river, but over Broomielaw Bridge and Clydebank.

In the hotel the illusion grew. The hour was noon and the European population were having their little drinks, and with each pink gin the aura of Sauchiehall Street strengthened while, alas, my native affection for it lessened. Not in order to find Glasgow by the Irrawaddy had I travelled seven thousand miles—in rebellion I hailed a taxi and asked to be driven to the Chinese Consul-General.

In that shady house on the Prome Road where the bamboo curtains rustled and a sweet small Chinese girl asked me to fill up forms, I knew brief peace. Eight rupees to pay, ten minutes to wait, a short interview with a most courteous official; the visa for China was as easy as all that. Refreshed, I returned to do battle with Rangoon, which wasn't so simple.

They said, "It is a hopeless proposition for an Englishwoman to travel the highway *alone*, especially *in* the rainy season *and* in the middle of China's war."

I said to stop being so stupid and to give me some wholesome advice.

Well, they didn't approve of it, and they weren't at all sure about what Authority would say, and they hoped I was barking

up the wrong tree anyway; but perhaps I had better see the head of a big Chinese Government concern engaged in moving arms and stores into China. This gentleman proved to be inaccessible—the only high-hat Chinese I came across—and an under-manager painstakingly repeated the same story. Englishwoman . . . alone . . . rains . . . war. "The other way to China so near, so safe," he added brightly. "Ship to Hanoi and then a nice train journey straight up to Chungking."

At this point I made a bad mistake. I should have re-oriented myself, thrown my mind right back to Russian ways, sat fat and told the little man I should wait until he too realized the necessity of entering his country by the road visualised by Sun Yat Sen; but instead I walked out in an evil and Western temper and reverted to the Glaswegians who, to their eternal credit and my shame, decided they had better hand me over to their Mr. S. C. Liu.

He was brisk and efficient; he had himself travelled the highway; he knew more completely than I shall ever know that to give a person heart's desire just once or twice in life is to create happiness. To my protests against the notion of ten days lolling around the Indian Ocean and China Seas he turned a bland smile. "We go to see Mr. Chen; it is but a few steps to the Bank of China."

As we crossed the street he said courteously, "Our Central Government will be pleased to welcome a Western writer who has come all the way from England to report on our struggle against Japanese aggression."

That pulled me up with a jerk. Until my arrival in Rangoon the Sino-Japanese war had not loomed large on my horizon and although I had only known Mr. Liu a few hours it seemed vitally necessary to tell him so, even if he scorned my proposed visit to his country as a result. "But I'm not going to China to report on the war," I answered. "I'm going because as far back as I can remember I've wanted to travel through China more than through any other country. There were lots of other places, Russia particularly—though that was different because it meant going home, but China was always first in my mind. It is difficult to explain . . ."

Mr. Liu waited politely, leaning on his umbrella, while I mumbled disjointed phrases about Waley's translations, the

picture of "The Earthly Paradise" in the British Museum, Confucianism and the ceramic art of the Ming dynasty. "I suppose," I ended feebly, "I really wanted to see your people because they are so much older than any other civilised race."

He smiled and shook his head. "Why bother over reasons? You just had to go to China; that was written down in your life and now you are going. I think," he added, "you will find that you revisit your home."

We were standing in Phayre Street, centre of Rangoon's business district, and the only reminders of the East were the hot sun above us and the red betel-stained pavement beneath our feet, yet as I smiled back at Mr. Liu I felt suddenly very close to his country.

"Come along," he said gently, "Mr. Chen will be waiting, and also his friend, a Director of the Highway."

So I met Mr. R. C. Chen and Mr. Yang-Heng; and what I owe to these two is the whole of my Chinese journey and more than that, a sense of friendship with the only race in the world who possess true philosophy of mind.

With infinite tact they left out of our conversation the two things I could not change, the colour of my skin and my sex, and concentrated upon the one fact which mattered—the rains. Beyond Lungling there had been a landslide; I must understand that it would take many coolies much labour to repair this, but they advised I left by train for Lashio, the Northern Shan State town from which the Highway ran through a hundred miles of Burmese territory to the frontier at Wan Ting, in four days time. "And from Lashio to Kunming¹ you will please travel as our guest."

The day seemed even brighter; the roofs of Shwe Dagon glittered in the sunlight; Mr. Liu and I hustled back to the hotel to discuss ways and means. There were many purchases to be made; a cot bed and bedding, mosquito netting, tinned foods, small gifts for the Chinese officials with whom I should stay, khaki shirts and skirt for myself, and the hundred and one oddments needed for a journey through long stretches of country where it would be impossible to buy anything.

"I will do the shopping for you in the bazaars," said Mr. Liu decidedly, "it will be much cheaper for you."

¹Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province, familiar to Europeans as Yunnanfu.

I was profoundly grateful. Quite apart from the certainty that I should be robbed right and left if I attempted my own purchases, was my sense of guilt whenever I tendered a coin in payment for any article, for bad rupces were even more plentiful than bad Egyptian piastres and the vendor's habit was to ring my money on the counter and, in six cases out of ten, return it to me with a regretful smile. So Mr. Liu departed with a long list, a small studious figure who walked determinedly under his huge black umbrella, and I sat down to consider my revolutionized ideas of the Chinese. True, my knowledge of them was extremely slight, gleaned from hearsay, books and casual encounters with members of their race in other parts of the world; but nothing I had learnt had prepared me for their amazing kindness, their attention to practical detail, their strong sense of humour. Within twenty-four hours they had adopted me, a complete stranger. I had a bag full of letters of introduction. I should leave for Lashio in four days' time.

II

In contented mood I prowled round Rangoon, eschewing the grand wide streets where the Europeans had their offices, and concentrating on the crowded bazaars where the contents of the shops overflowed on to pavements crowded with bearded Sikhs, wiry Gurkhas, expressionless Chinese, miserable Bengalis and a similar wretched breed from near Madras, hill-men from the Shan States—and Burmen. The last-named seemed in a sad minority considering this was their capital city but, as in East Africa, the Indians had smelt profit from afar and descended like locusts. They ran the bazaars, built the railways, drove the taxis, swept the streets, acted as servants to the Europeans, made money methodically and in pretty useful quantities—for you never *give* an Indian anything; he takes it and makes sure it is a pound and a half of flesh. From them the Burmen had learnt the art of begging and several other bad habits including that of sleeping on the pavements; in fact they had learnt everything from the Indians except the latter's thrifty ways, for of what use was thrift in a land where a man might exist happily on a handful of paddy and the fruit that dropped from the trees?

I wandered through the bazaars looking at this and that, stepping every few minutes over apparently dead bodies stretched full-length in their white, shroud-like robes. It was a Saturday afternoon and up and down the streets whizzed small buses driven at alarming speed and packed to the roof with perspiring football devotees, for there was a big match on between Rangoon and some Chinese team and the Burmen have taken to this Western sport like ducks to water. At a street corner a tall Sikh in a loin cloth stood with his arms upraised to heaven while a Burmese barber shaved his chest; at the pavement's edge squatted the ladies in waiting of the city, their Mongol faces smeared with white rice powder which ended abruptly on the temples leaving an inch-wide band of brown skin below their glossy, up-coiled hair, their eyes kohl-darkened, the lips masking their hideous, betel-stained teeth vermilion painted; from the shops darted salesmen waving pineapples, tin pails, rolls of silk, bunches of plantains or teapots above their heads and chanting their wares, and along the gutters ran the rickshawmen whining for custom.

Decorously the better-class Burmese women took the air in stuffy cabs with latticed wooden shutters, their moon-faces peering grotesquely from a narrow aperture surmounted by the long plumes of grass carried by the driver for his mangy horse. A medicine man advertised in English, Burmese and Hindustani that he gave "five minute eternal cures to all sufferers from diabetes, piles, boils and syphilis". Across the road a Bengali threw an epileptic fit. Just ahead of me a Sikh upset a Burman's fruit stall and the two fought each other fiercely among a mess of mango juice, stones and skins. Beside me strode three Buddhist priests in their saffron robes, heads shaven, hands flourishing the inevitable cheroots, bamboo umbrellas tucked under their arms. In the distance, towering above the city, shone the roofs of Shwe Dagon and, heedless of the people who pressed about me, I stood still and gaped at the sheer beauty of the scene, for in the brilliant sunlight the dirt, the smells were forgotten and what remained was a maze of colour and heat and sound. Coolie hats, scarlet pugarees, white turbans; gay sarongs of green, purple, pink, blue and yellow; skins of all tints from the near-white of the Shan to the chocolate of the Bengali; liquid Chinese speech forming a background to the harsh, shrill jabber of the Indian hillmen, all these set against the blazing loveliness of the pagoda.

Suddenly I knew I had to visit Shwe Dagon.

Perhaps it was a pity that as I squatted on the pavement step of the temple removing my shoes and stockings half the British community should pass by in their cars because this crime of mine had astonishing repercussions; but at the moment I thought only of the eight hairs reputed to have been given by Buddha to two brothers named Pu and Ta Paw about the year 580 B.C. They built the pagoda as a shrine for these treasures and founded round it a village called Dagon, which saw fighting at intervals during centuries of Burmese warfare, being finally rebuilt by King Alaungpaya as a commemoration of his victory over the Talaings in 1763. "Yangon", the end of the war, he called it, and from it sprang the present city laid out by the English Lieutenant Fraser nearly a hundred years later.

On the steps leading up to the temple women sold horrible paper flowers and fans with which to propitiate Buddha, brown babies rolled in the dust, guides with unmentionable diseases wriggled themselves towards me. I passed on into the circular corridor which rings the outer shrines. On my left men and women placed fat and flickering candles before the great gilded Buddhas which stared obliquely into nothingness, and beside the kneeling figures were huddled humps of rags—their relatives who were sick unto death; and even as I picked my way across the bruised fruit skins, dirty papers and human excreta that covered the pavement an aged man gave a gasping cough and went on, I trust, to his promised heaven. Automatically I turned my head to the right and stood transfixed, for here the corridor was lined with beastly little shops selling contraceptives, aphrodisiacs, nasty postcards and nastier books with gaudy covers.

Trying to worry out this strange juxtaposition of holiness and vice I cannoned into a priest who addressed me, most oddly, in German. "You aid me in my pilgrimage to Rome?" he said.

I hadn't any answer. Bewildered as I was by the Shwe Dagon, I simply could not understand why one of its henchmen should wish to journey to the very heart of a Christian faith; but he marched me round the remainder of the circle and told me his life-story as I re-donned my shoes and stockings. "I was born and bred in Frankfurt-um-Main and when I was eighteen I voyaged East in a merchant ship and met a noble priest who led me towards Buddhism. Eighteen years I have worn the robes in a Burmese

monastery and for sixteen of these I have endeavoured to lead the pilgrimages to Rome. Always my followers desert me, some in Calcutta, some in Karachi—last time they all went sick at Mandalay, but I went on to Tibet and meditated there. They are very lazy people, these Burmese, they lack the driving spirit.”

Struggling with my last suspender I managed to pant out, “But why Rome?”

“Why not?” he answered simply. “The Holy Catholic Church is decadent. It is time her followers were converted to our older, truer faith. Come now, we will walk and I will explain to you what I mean.”

We walked by the Royal Lakes but I heard little of his speech because my dazed mind just refused to cope with a citizen of Frankfurt who marched about Rangoon in saffron robes and held the sublime conviction that it was his duty to preach Buddhism to the Western races. I was roused, however, when he informed me I must stay in Rangoon and help him by bribing his fellow-priests to join him in his travels.

“But I have no money and I go to China.”

“Not China,” he replied decidedly, “and you can raise subscriptions for me among the Europeans.”

I had a horrid mental vision of myself doing a house to house collection with a black begging bowl and said hastily it was time I was returning to my hotel, whereat he glared at me so fiercely I remembered all the stories I had heard of the Buddhist priests; how they stirred up trouble and revolt, how they carried the long curved *dah* knives under the voluminous folds of their robes, and stabbed people in the back if they got a chance. Firmly I hailed a rickshaw and felt relieved when he gave me an “*Auf Wiedersehen*” which accorded ill with his appearance.

Later that afternoon as I swam in the reservoir I asked a Viennese friend about the strange German priest. “Oh, yes, we know about him and he is genuinely a German. He is mad, of course, but sometimes I think he is the only sincere holy man in Burma. These *hpoongyis* (priests) are the biggest set of scoundrels on the face of the earth.”

He told me then of the very real menace the priests were to Burma's peace. Ostensibly their functions in life were twofold; to give the people religious instruction and to teach the children, and their worldly belongings were strictly limited to five articles;

a mat, an umbrella, a string of beads, a fan and the robes of their office. In reality many of them were drawn from the criminal class (if you wished to avoid arrest in Burma you promptly joined the priesthood for a spell) and practically all of them batted on the rest of the population. Each morning at dawn they set forth with their begging bowls and were supposed to eat the rice and titbits given them by noon, and to retire into their monasteries for prayer by six in the evening; yet one might see them strolling into cinemas in mufti or eating large meals in restaurants long after midnight, while later when I travelled up-country I myself was welcomed by a priest who threw open the door of a huge store-room packed from floor to ceiling with every household commodity from grape-nuts to candles and invited me to take what I wished, "because I have everything here".

Oh, yes, the Buddhist priests in Burma were omnipotent and omnipresent, and their activities were by no means confined to the gentle art of grafting. They preached violent sedition, working always on the credulity and superstition of the simple Burmen, and in the 1938 Rangoon riots had started the trouble by rushing out of a pagoda and knifing a bus-load of Indians in the back. By the time the police arrived they were piously saying their devotions within the temple, secure in the knowledge that not even the British Government could invade their sanctuary with impunity¹, and perhaps the classic instance of their resentment against invasion is what happened when the Shwe Dagon caught fire. The British Fire-Brigade rolled up, all efficient with hose-pipes and ladders, but so soon as they attempted to cross a floor deep in white-hot wood ash the priests set about them and hammered them viciously—because they had not removed their boots! Imagine letting one of the seven wonders of the world risk destruction because you had your boots on?

Almost I lost sight of China, so absorbed was I in *hpoongyi* misdemeanours. In no other ancient religion possibly do the priests wield so much temporal power—and turn it towards evil. In nearly every human being there is some element for good to

¹A Burmese paper of late June, 1939, prints an indignant letter complaining of the action of the police in raiding one of the Shwe Dagon monasteries in search of incriminating documents (*with their boots on*). Naturally, since the priests knew a trick worth two of that, they did not find any evidence of sedition, so the virtuous patriot responsible for the epistle demands that, in the likely event of the monastery suing for damages, "each wicked policeman be made to pay these out of his own pocket".

which one may point—there is none in the average Burmese Buddhist priest. Corrupt to the bone and having all the attributes of the snakes which inhabit their jungles, they rule the land invincibly, horribly, and their profession is merely a cloak for wrong-doing. They stay in their monasteries just as long as it suits them, they own no allegiance to any law of faith or state, the worst insult you may offer a Burman is to tell him he is the son of a *hpoongyi*.

One cannot, alas, go on swimming in a reservoir discussing Buddhism for ever. The sun disappeared, the mosquitoes danced above the warm shining water, we trailed back to the bungalow for hot baths and then I lay in a long chair on the verandah watching my host and his two house-mates, an Englishman and a Dutchman, doing up their accounts for the week. No three Englishmen were ever so particular over the marketing bills, but while I admired the method of these three young men I was more interested in the fly-catching lizards which decorated the ceiling and occasionally plopped on to my head only to leave their tails behind when I caught hold of them. A pleasant, bird-like sound they made, but yet more intriguing was a far bigger member of their species which lurked curled up in the kitchen rafters and uncoiled itself each evening to glance down with an intelligent eye and say, "Tock-taw" seven times.

"Only six times is unlucky," said the Viennese gravely, so I waited until the lizard obliged with seven perfect calls and then drove homewards. Rain had fallen, washing away the pungent smell of Indians and rotting fruit. A silver half-moon rose in the East. Towering against an indigo sky was the shimmering Shwe Dagon, its golden roofs floodlit and festooned with multi-coloured lights which blazed like so many jewels. Gazing at its fairy beauty I forgot the priests and remembered only the labour of the devout brothers who built this shrine for Buddha's hairs.

III

Back in the hotel my sins returned to greet me with all the force of a boomerang. My mad scheme for travelling the Yunnan-Burma highway was bad enough; my behaviour in Rangoon was much worse. I had been seen conversing with a priest, a choleric Scot had almost suffered an apoplectic seizure in his car upon watching me remove shoes and stockings on the pavement, bathing in the company of depraved Continentals was a dangerous pastime. Did I not realize that such things simply were not pukkha burra sahib?

Meekly I tried to conform to standard. I went to the Gymkhana Club, I danced, I dined at the Silver Grill, I watched the antics of a contortionist and the gyrations of a dusky male dancer who billed himself as the brother of a famous film star, I drank pink gins and made inane conversation and wondered why Far Eastern hotels should have the indecent habit of displaying one's room number in three-inch high letters on one's dining-table. When a smiling Mr. S. C. Liu reappeared with the results of his shopping I nearly fell on his neck for joy.

That man was a marvel. He had thought of everything, down to iodine and a soda-water bottle opener, but as I studied my baggage I had qualms for it contained a bewildering array of half-bottles of Johnnie Walker and tins of Lucky Strike cigarettes—the little gifts for my prospective hosts. “What about the Chinese Customs at Wan Ting?”

His smile widened. “English lady's personal luggage,” he said, “and here is your water filter.”

This was a colossal jar of porous stone with “made in Austria” printed across its porcelain top and was to prove at once my bane and my delight; the former because I had to stand over the coolies while they boiled water, poured it into a pail and set the filter in it, the latter because in the fever belts malaria and dysentery were rife and even the hill streams carried disease.

Curiously enough it was the water filter which brought my mind back to China's war, gave me a glimmer of realization of what her people were enduring, and when I went to draw some Chinese dollars from Mr. Chen we talked for the first time of his country's problems, while the fine sad face of Generalissimo

Chiang Kai-shek looked down on us from its frame on the wall.

There was no war hysteria about China's hatred of Japan. It was a deep, quiet, eternal hatred which moved steadily, tortoise fashion, towards its goal. In one year, in two or in twenty, this war of attrition would end with the absorption of all Japanese sent into the occupied areas. The parrot phrase, "You cannot wage war without money", so prevalent in Europe, had no echo in this Eastern struggle, for to the Chinese money is merely a yard-stick, it has never grown into a commodity. Tenacity of purpose, backed by a philosophy so sublime it awed one, was the essence of their attitude to their invaders, and study of a large scale map giving the line of the Japanese advance proved how much this tenacity was bound to weigh in the long run for the front ran in jagged spearpoints up the eastern valleys, zig-zagging madly from north to south. "Occupied territories" was a loose and meaningless term. Certainly the Japanese held the railways, the roads, the main lines of communication and key positions in the way of ports and cities, but what of the vast areas lying between each of their vaunted captures? Impossible to imagine these great tracts of country where the Chinese worked on busily ever becoming "occupied", for they were so many mouths that would simply open and swallow the little yellow men who harassed them.

But in the attitude of high-class Chinese towards Europe and America there was a regret which showed signs of developing into real resentment. To them the menace of the totalitarian states was a very little thing, and as I listened to first-hand information of air-raids, of casualties, of famine and of hideous treatment of prisoners I partly understood their viewpoint, for they were living through a horror beyond our comprehension and they said, "Your politicians make many speeches, and your newspapers are full of scares about Danzig and plans for the evacuation of your people, and in England you dig little trenches in your gardens. Why do you so waste your time? Why cannot you realize that it is in the Far East the war for world peace must be fought out?"

Europe was still at peace when I visited China, but even now when she is at war I sympathize with those Chinese speakers and wonder if orient and occident, slick modernity and age-old civilization will ever band together in defence against a common enemy?

We went on to speak of the Tientsin trouble, of the Japanese report that forty-five Soviet airplanes had been shot down across the Manchukuo border, of a press paragraph cancelling the leave of the Home Fleet, and as we walked back to the hotel we saw a grim convoy of lorries loading up ammunition outside the South-Western Transportation Company's offices; but because the Chinese are innately cheerful we parted with a joke about my Chinese dollars which I carried in an enormous envelope, "All bran' new, all printed in England!"

IV

In my room I found the bearer surveying with pride no less than five cot-beds and hold-alls of bedding. "All come this morning," he announced, "Memsahib travel well!"

Such was the kindness of the Rangoon folk. Basely I chose an Englishman's hold-all containing feather-weight Jaeger blankets, sheets and pillowcases, and a magnificent bed provided by the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company; then I spent the rest of the day in writing "thank you" notes and instructing Mr. Liu to give the sleeping-kit he had bought for me to some needy Chinese.

But that evening all Rangoon was uneasy over Tientsin and Hong Kong. One man regarded the trouble as meaning that Japan wanted to back out altogether and was making a last, defiant gesture to the Western powers; another saw in it the beginning of a ghastly conflagration bound to involve the whole world; rumours hummed under the punka-fans and I went out and bought a second-class ticket to Lashio, a purchase which effectively diverted everybody's attention from war. An Englishwoman . . . alone . . . in the rains . . . pa-ti-ti pa-ti-ta . . . simply *could not* travel second-class!

She did—and liked it.

The compartment was a four-berthed box labelled heavily "Ladies Only" and in it sat a voluble chi-chi lady with a fat babu husband who informed me he made soda-water, presented me with a bottle and said that his Little Flower of the Mountains was journeying to Mandalay and as he wished to kiss her good-bye would I please look out of the window. There followed the sound of sobbing and a series of loud smacks, but at last the gentleman

skipped out, the train jolted forward, and the lady began a four-hour explanation in order to convince me that she was French by birth but somehow had arrived in Burma via Alexandria. "All my brothers and sisters are blond, so blond," she finished, "and before my birth my mother sighed for a brunette daughter so she journeyed to the Arakan hills where the people are very dark—and sure enough she had me!"

It was an ingenuous tale, but the afternoon was hot and wet, the mosquitoes were devouring me, the windows were hermetically sealed and the lady had drenched herself in white rose scent.

"That is why," she rattled on brightly, "my husband calls me his Mountain Flower. Ah, but Alexandria! There is a wonderful city! The fruits—why, my brothers and I used to eat melons at two in the morning. That would not be approved of in Rangoon, but in Alexandria one is free. And the cabarets . . .!" She bunched her fingers and kissed them.

My experience of Alexandria's cabarets hadn't been so good. I lay back and prayed for Mandalay.

Very lovely that city looked when we reached it early next morning, with its pagodas dreaming by the Irrawaddy, its Flame of the Forest trees, its gigantic walled fort, but what really pleased eyes which ached with sight of endless paddy fields was the long line of hills stretching to the North-east. Thankfully I said good-bye to my companion and achieved a coolie who seized the hold-all with such vigour that five tins of Lucky Strikes rolled under the train. Somehow these were retrieved by an Indian and I was pushed into another "Ladies Only" on the Lashio train, this time, thank God, alone.

Almost at once we began to climb the wooded foothills, zig-zagging and reversing up and down their sides, seeing below us the vast Burmese plain. It was only six o'clock and at each village the priests walked with their begging bowls, their robes a brilliant splash of colour against the green jungle, and everywhere were the white pagodas with tufts of grass springing from their roofs and enormous, griffon-like carved creatures guarding their doors.

Up we went and up, over three thousand feet to Maymyo, staring down at the curving brown Irrawaddy, at Mandalay and the Mingun Pagoda, at Sagaing until we reached the Shan plateau and I felt irritated because I could not wander through

the Southern Shan States. There were so many things there I wished to see; the long-necked people of Kalaw who bracelet the necks of their infants, adding one bracelet each year so that the neck gradually stretches to a foot length, the myriad orchids which star the mountain meadows, the Inle Lakes of perfect beauty, the old Sawbwas or Chiefs who still have definite powers over their lands and peoples. But I was China-bound; I had no time for lotus eating on the Shan plateau.

The villages grew fewer, the jungle thicker as we jolted northwards. The great teak trees spread their wide leaves, the belladonna opened its creamy white flowers, bushes massed with scarlet, gold and purple blossom edged the gorges through which we crawled. On little stretches of open land men ploughed the paddy fields with huge water buffalo that lumbered occasionally to nearby streams and sat down in them with an almighty splosh. At each small station we stopped for long stays and at one of these I bought a pineapple, eighteen plantains and six mangoes for eight annas, thereafter chewing contentedly as I leaned out of the window to watch the fun—for a station crowd in the Shan States is worth seeing.

The small, pale Shan women moved superbly, big baskets of tea or fruit carried on their heads, their wooden shoes clacking on the platform, while their menfolk squatted on their haunches chewing betel-nut, and the gaunt Indians hitched their filthy garments about their skinny legs, drew water from the station pump and used it to wash a few dried peas or beans down their throats. Watching this performance I understood exactly why the Indian wrests all the best jobs from black, brown and yellow folk in African and Far Eastern countries. For a few weeks or for his life long he can exist on a handful of dried vegetables and copious draughts of water. He carries no baggage, he has an uncanny nose for money, even when he has worked up a sound business such as a trading store he never spends his profits but sends them back to India for the purchase of land on which his always numerous family settle. In his old age he too will return there and his sons will keep him in payment for what he has done for them. Neither the simple Shan nor the crafty but stupid Burman has the least chance against him, and he defeats even the Chinese, whose propensity for hard work is off-set by a passion for gambling and a love for his stomach.

In a station restaurant they offered me goat rubbed in garlic for breakfast and said I should get lunch at Hsibaw, formerly the home of the Sawbwa of that State, a grand old man of whom I had heard much. Unfortunately he could not achieve a son, so he built new palaces at frantic rate since with the completion of each fresh home his laws dictated he might take unto himself another wife. His endeavours, alas, were vain and he died heirless some few months ago.

But now we were coming to Gokteik Gorge, that astonishing rift which cuts through the mountains. At the bottom of its gloomy canyon boils the Nam Pan Hse river and at one point the sides of the gorge have caved in to form a natural bridge, beside which an American firm of engineers built a temporary viaduct as far back as 1900. Thirty nine years later the train still crosses this viaduct and the railway company, grateful perhaps for its remarkable durability have plastered the sides of the approaching line with notices saying, "This way to the caves", "Bathing is dangerous here", "Please follow the jungle path".

It took me all my courage to cross the gorge in the train, let alone attempt swimming in the maelstrom beneath it.

It was goat again at Hsibaw—this time minus the garlic—and I gaped at the Hpoongyi-Kyaung (monastery) with its delicately pointed pagodas and found the Mytinge river a gracious, quick-flowing stream far less muddy in appearance than the rivers of Burma proper, but now I was growing impatient and as we puffed on past the lovely Mansam Falls and the settlement which marked the Burma Corporation's lead zinc mines I could not even appreciate the glory of the sunset—I wanted to reach Lashio, the gateway to China.

Chapter Two

TIME-LAG IN LASHIO

I

IN the fitful light from two lamps Lashio Station was a jumble of coolie hats, bearded Sikhs, bundles of bedding, perspiring Bengalis, a clamour of speech and an overpowering smell of oiled and unwashed humanity. The Indian stationmaster from a village down the line minced up to me, a gaudy check coat over his khaki shorts. "My name on my card," he bowed and handed me a piece of pasteboard on which I deciphered, *Mr. Danielli, B.A. failure*. "I introduce you to the Police Superintendent, very busy the British Police, they look after every one in Lashio."

The policeman was Eurasian and most efficient. He bundled me into the front seat of a bus which already contained half the population of the Northern Shan States and said he would take me first to deliver my letters of introduction to Mr. Chen Yang Wang, Manager of the Highway. "He lives in Old Lashio. We can get a taxi down from the bazaar."

The bus tore through the night along a straight road which boasted electric light and several barriers which were swung back by military or civil police. Past us thundered truck after truck, lorry after lorry, for China's munitions must travel towards the frontier between the hours of six p.m. and six a.m. I said brightly that I understood I was to be the first passenger in one of the new Stewart buses due to start on the morrow and the policeman roared with laughter. "You might start next week, or not for a fortnight—and there's been a big landslide beyond Lungling."

Morosely I clambered out of the bus in the middle of the crowded bazaar, stumbled over a fakir and his brass bowl and stepped into the Lashio taxi, a vehicle bought for fifteen rupees quite a long time ago. It was as well I did not then know the amount of money I was to pour into the pockets of its owner, a pock-marked lunatic who smelt of death and worse, drove like Jehu, always took you to the wrong place and suffered an inability

to understand a word you said until it came to arguing about the fare—he showed remarkable intelligence at that.

But on my first night in Lashio I was far too preoccupied with my desire to leave it to worry over a taxi-man, and as we bumped and swayed down the Highway I pestered the policeman with asinine questions. They had said in Rangoon that the bus would start on the morrow; what then had gone wrong? Was it not possible to circumvent the landslide on mule-back, on foot, by sedan chair or by swimming and pick up another lift on its far side? Could I not buy a seat on a munition truck?

His patience was admirable—he'd lived a while in Lashio, and knew much better than I did the peace which descends upon one in that delectable spot; but it took the handshakes of some ten of Mr. Chen Yang Wang's staff to complete the re-orientation I had vaguely begun in Rangoon. "We are so glad to see you! Come to the window and see our lovely new buses! Very comfortable they are, and we only wait for the drivers to come from China—but to-morrow or to-morrow, what does it matter?"

Outside several coolies brandished flaming torches and in their light I looked at the blue and silver buses standing in the yard; but my mind was in a trans-Caucasian inn with a Kurd who said, "*S'ye tchass' s'ye tchass*", and suddenly it did not signify how long I stayed in Lashio for Mr. S. C. Liu had been right; in the company of these beaming fellow-countrymen of his I knew again what hitherto I had known only in Russia, that time was nothing and friendliness all. The six hundred miles which separated me from Rangoon multiplied themselves as I turned back to face Mr. Wang. "There were so many troubles about my travelling your Highway; now they are all smoothed out."

"And why not?" he answered. "You *wanted to do so*, that is the main thing and because of it we welcome you. But I believe you want more—what is it?"

We were standing in the Highway depot's communal bedroom and on either side of us were rows of cot-beds very different from the sumptuous one contained in my baggage, and in his blue slopsuit Mr. Wang looked like any one except the Manager of the most important entrance into China. I said, "I want to understand your philosophy, the thing which has kept you going for the past two or three thousand years despite the fact your economical, social and political life has been at a standstill."

Being an Asiatic he gave me no formula for Chinese philosophy; if he had done so it would not have done me any good. But his smile was tender, reassuring: "I think, somehow, you feel at home with us?"

Stumbling into the darkness I achieved Jehu and an irate Eurasian policeman. "You have been far too long a time here," announced the latter severely, "and the *dak* bungalow does not like visitors who arrive many hours after the Mandalay train is in."

I replied, "The *dak* bungalow may take me or leave me, I don't care which,"

And I didn't; quite unexpectedly and for the second time in rather a variegated life I had come home.

A curious thing, that sense of homecoming. At the time I accepted it merely as a soporific; rewriting this passage thousands of miles away from China I realize it not only enabled me to enjoy a long journey which would have been anathema to most but altered my whole concept of living.

II

The Northern Shan States were mine to wander in, but all that really mattered was the reddish ribbon of road winding Northwards into the hills for nowhere else is there a road so romantic, so tragic as this Highway which has materialized from the vision of that grand old man, Sun Yat Sen. He saw it as a trade route between South-western China and Burma; it has become, through Japan's war of aggression, the life cord linking China with the outer world and the history of its growth should be a lesson to every Western race. Money is the least thing it has cost; for its completion thousands upon thousands of men have lived and laboured until the toll taken of their strength was so great they lay down and died beside their unfinished work and in their stead have come more thousands, their desire for the road a clear flame within them. Men of high culture, graduates from Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and Yale, engineers who have gained experience in many places, and humble coolies who toil uncomplainingly through bitter winters and under tropic

summer suns—all these have struggled equally that their country may have this sorely needed route.

They call the road "The Gateway to New China"; it is more than that, it is the epitome of an age-old philosophy, it is the very spirit of unconquerable China. Almost you believe that if you stoop down and put your hand on its rough red surface you will feel the pulse which has beat so steadily through centuries of disruption.

Lashio owed its existence to the road. A brief year or so ago it was an insignificant post containing only a few Europeans. Now it was a growing town—or rather two towns—for old Lashio and Lashio proper were separated by some three miles—to which flocked European and American truck and ammunition manufacturers, contractors, Armenians, Filipinos, Burmen, Chinese and, of course, Indians by the hundred. There was a British Frontier Force; there were Military and Civil Police, Military and Civil Hospitals, a Chinese Hospital, a Circuit House and a *dak* Bungalow; there was an English doctor and there was a very handsome petrol pump; and down in the bazaar Chinese store-keepers jostled Indians, Messrs. Rowe of Rangoon sold you bicycles and nail-scissors, Mohammed Singh offered to tailor your clothes "in the English style", and Hup Loo announced he gave the highest pawnbroking loans on goods.

On the surface Lashio was beautiful, for it was set in a cup of the intensely green, jungle-covered hills and walking its rough streets were Shans in their gay coloured silk sarongs, Kachins in their hand-woven boleros, skirts and leggings, Indian hillmen with high white turbans, Ghurkas with scarlet pugarees. Coolie hats bobbed up and down, the Chinese wore bright blue coats, black umbrellas formed a background for multi-hued parasols twirling over their owners' shoulders, and the hot air was full of the sound of different tongues. But beneath the seeming carelessness of the people and the gaiety of their speech hid all the avarice, all the beastliness war brings in its train. "Money from China's war!" was the cry of all these strangers who had descended on this hill-town, so prices were exorbitant, and all manner of graft was practised, and the Chinese were bombarded by eloquent gentlemen who wished to sell them everything from guns to toothpicks.

Men had forgotten, perhaps, that as well as being unconquer-

able the Chinaman is incorruptible—when his wisdom tells him to be so.

With the policeman I went the round of Lashio's gambling and opium dens. The former were more thrilling by far than any European Casino, because within them games for incredibly high stakes were played with dominoes by Chinese with expressionless faces; the latter were depressing hovels wherein Chinese and Indians lay in untidy heaps, wooden pillows beneath their tousled heads, the long crude pipes between their lips. Here, for less than an anna, a smoker might purchase enough cooked opium for one pipeful, but as I watched an aged, emaciated creature twirling his little ball of the drug over a small lamp I could not grudge him his brief oblivion. He was very old, he had lost three sons, he would never live to return to his native Canton now under Japanese rule. The policeman shook a drowsy Sikh, rating him for turning from heavy drinking to opium; the proprietor rinsed a pipe in boiling water, heated the ball of sticky brown stuff and handed me the outfit with a courtly bow. I inhaled once and fled for the door, there to try to overcome nausea by playing with a grey monkey which perched on the gate-post. Behind me the smokers sighed and groaned and turned in their sleep; before me the main street of Lashio saw-sawed up and down in the moonlight in the most unaccountable manner. "To-morrow," said the policeman's voice, "we will go through the jungle to a Kachin hill village where they make the country liquor from rice."

I shuddered and made an unsteady way up the hill to the *dak* bungalow; but the next afternoon found me toiling up a narrow jungle path in the policeman's wake. Rare orchids twisted themselves round the tree boughs, the path was bordered by scarlet and yellow blossoming bushes, little pigs rooted for the bruised fruit below a giant forest fig the size of an elm. Beside us ran two Shan boys carrying baskets into which they popped the big crickets that shrilled in the jungle grasses, for these were a great delicacy when fried and their mothers had sent them out with strict instructions to return home with as many as possible, and each time we came to a mountain spring we all knelt down and bathed our perspiring hands and faces. On the occasional open patches of ground were terraced paddy fields, and I learnt that the Shans had the African habit of firing

the forest in order to fertilize the soil for the planting of their grain; but on this particular day all the villagers had gone to some new fields farther up in the hills, so we climbed for nearly three-hours before finding a place which was not deserted. Here a woman peered out at us from her bamboo home perched on stilts, so we removed our shoes, climbed her ladder and sat down cross-legged on her floor. She was courteous, bringing out her black hand-woven bolero, sarong and short leggings embroidered in reds and blues for my inspection, but when country liquor was mentioned she became quite agitated. Lately, it appeared, she had lost her husband, and it was not orthodox for a widow either to brew liquor or to fetch any for visitors from a nearby still.

It was late afternoon before we reached another village and received a beaming welcome from a much-tattooed Shan, his dainty small wife, his toothless mama-in-law and his son of six months old, a herculean infant who not only crawled but actually walked. In vain I sat cross-legged and drew pictures in a notebook of children who owed their bandy legs to such habits: the Shan merely spat betel-nut and grinned at me, while his wife fetched a black wooden pitcher of water, four small tumblers and a quart bottle half-full of colourless liquid.

That country liquor was pure fire-water. Roughly distilled behind a bamboo screen, it was sold at four annas a quart, with the result that processions of the cosmopolitan denizens of Lashio took the jungle path on moonlit nights, empty bottles hidden beneath their garments as the drinking of the spirit was against the law. I sipped about a teaspoonful in the same amount of water and felt as though my throat membranes were being burnt out, but the Shan gulped his unconcernedly from a tea-bowl, neat, and never turned a hair. Out of curiosity I poured a little into a bowl and set a match to it—it burned until there was no residue! After that I conceived the brilliant notion of pouring some into an empty quinine bottle and later found it most efficacious in hardening blistered feet.

It was very peaceful in that Shan home with the cool evening breeze blowing through it. The mother fed her baby, mama-in-law chewed, the Shan accepted a cigarette and at intervals spat with amazing accuracy through a rift in the bamboo flooring, the policeman stirred the fire lazily with a stick and I gazed

alternately through the openings at either end of the room. To the east the ghost of a moon rose in a pale sky and far beneath it in the valley a dark blur showed the roofs of Lashio; to the west the mountains shone golden in the sunset light; all around us was the deep silence of the jungle, broken at last by the tinkling bells of the oxen as the Kachins returned from their work.

Regretfully we said good-bye and swung down the path in the dusk. Below us the lights of the town sprang into being; above us the moon grew full and serene, illuminating the road which led to China.

III

Life was peaceful in Lashio. My room at the *dak* bungalow was large and cool and the *durwan*,¹ a Ghurka from Nepal, looked after me like a baby, running in and out with hot baths, pots of tea, eggs, toast and bottles of soda-water; but he, no less than Rangoon, held innate disapproval of a mad Englishwoman who lived in such peculiar fashion and had a bee in her bonnet about travelling the Highway. "She ought to be eating roast chicken," he wailed to the policeman when I bought my own tins of sardines and sausages in the bazaar or ate huge meals at the Chinese eating-houses, and each evening after my Chinese friends had visited me he would inquire tenderly whether I were leaving on the morrow and sigh relievedly when he learnt I should remain at least another day.

Each morning I went down to Old Lashio, my object being to harass the gentle Mr. Wang about my journey. (There were various means of covering the three miles which separated us: once I careered madly down the hill on the *durwan's* bicycle, several times I walked one way, always, I regret to say, I ended by hiring the pock-marked Jehu and his vehicle for my return trip, three miles uphill in a shade temperature hovering near 90 degrees being heavy going.) But my daily visit was a point of honour and so soon as I appeared the genial engineer, Mr. Liu, would greet me from the office balcony, "Not to-day, to-morrow, to-morrow!" and I would prowling round the yard patting the nice new buses and dreaming of far Kunming.

¹ caretaker.

So delightful they were, these Chinese friends. Their days—and usually their nights—were filled with endless problems; the state of the road during this rainy season, the delivery of arms and stores to China before a certain date, the starting of huge convoys, the servicing of returning trucks and lorries, the arranging for sufficient petrol and oil and spare parts. Yet they had the time and patience to listen to my arguments, and every day one or more of them would take the trouble to come up to the bungalow and give me the latest news. Then we would talk and laugh and jest about many things; but always we came back to the subject of the road, and after they had gone I would go out and squat under the mango tree by the gate, and eat the luscious fruit picked for me by the sweeper's son, and watch the trucks which thundered past in a swirl of red dust, and dream of the time when I too should travel that way. Hour upon hour I spent beside the road—and the fascination of it grew.

There were minor excitements. There was the bazaar in Old Lashio, held every third day, when the Shans and Kachins from the hill-villages brought their fruit and vegetables in to market and you might buy three pounds of tomatoes for an anna, or a dozen pineapples for a rupee. Up and down the long rows of stalls I wandered with the policeman's Shan wife while she bargained ruthlessly for cabbages and vegetable marrows and runner beans. I bought a pair of Shan shoes from an old man who said the price would be one rupee four annas if I merely looked at them, but two annas less if I purchased them, and a lot of fruit, and a gay Shan bag to carry it in; but mostly I stared at the press of people in their rainbow-hued clothes and they stared back—for to them I was a complete oddity.

There were the Chinese restaurants and tea-houses also in Old Lashio where you drank fine tea from little grey bowls, and ate a dozen different delicacies with your rice, and supped noodle soup. All the Chinese in the town drifted into these places of an evening to sit by the smoky lamps and talk endlessly together, while in the dim corners crouched the opium smokers half asleep, waiting until they felt the uncontrollable urge to cross the road and find solace in yet another pipeful of the drug. The narrow twisting streets were ankle-deep in glutinous red mud, thanks to the eternal passage of trucks and lorries to and from

the ammunition dumps, but in the lights from the tea-houses and the bobbing lanterns carried by pedestrians they became rosy rivers broken by humps of black rock which turned out to be oxen too lazy to move until an irate truck-driver pushed them off the road with his bumpers. Not so long ago Lashio had been part of China and the Shans a Chinese people. British rule had not basically altered it, nor had the get-rich-quick contractors, nor yet the ubiquitous Indians. Instead China was practising her slow, methodical process of absorption and when peace came again to her Lashio would be as it always had been, a Chinese town.

Up at the *dak* bungalow there were various visitors, one of whom was a large German who glowered at me from the next balcony because I was being allowed to journey into China, whereas he had been told with courtesy by the Chinese officials to take his little bit of Germany elsewhere. "Ridiculous!" he exclaimed indignantly, "I am a man of intellect and you are a—how do you say it?—a gossip-page writer! Also I have the *Leica* camera."

The gossip-page accusation flicked me on the raw. I remarked acidly that I thought the camera was mostly to blame as it was made fully clear to all intending visitors that the Chinese did not exactly welcome cameras on the Highway. "After all, in Germany to-day foreigners are not allowed to photograph any points of military value. For myself, I left my camera in Rangoon and the Chinese are kindly giving me snapshots for my book."

"I repeat—ridiculous! All you will get are the sort of photographs they wish you to have. Now I, myself, have taken the most deplorable photographs of the opium dens in Lashio. Just fancy, opium-smoking in the twentieth century! I tell you, *gnadige frau*, there is to-day no nation worthy of the name . . ."

But I grew bored with the man. The opium-smoking of a handful of Chinese had gone on since the world began and, presumably, it would go on until the world ended. It represented in no degree the essential character of a people and I said so, whereupon my antagonist wagged a very Prussian head and skilfully changed the subject. "When you 'ike I trust you do not wear the rubber-soled shoes, *hein*? Very bad for the feet and I notice your left foot is already bandaged. Now if you propose to 'ike into China . . . ?"

Wrathfully I retreated into my room, but until the German eventually left in a temper for Rangoon he and his nonsense about "iking" haunted my days and I skulked up to the Military Hospital to have the Sikh orderly treat a heel poisoned through my jungle walks, praying fervently that my enemy would not see me. Even in the Far East, it seemed, one could not escape being dragooned by natives of a totalitarian state. First the *hpoongyi* from Frankfurt; now this horror with his precious *Leica*—it took the companionship of a mining engineer from Kalaw and his orchid-hunting brother-in-law to restore my peace of mind.

They were a delightful pair and their tour of the Northern Shan States in an ancient Ford capable of climbing the bungalow steps had a threefold purpose. The engineer had one eye on possible gold in Yunnan, silver near Lashio and lead zinc somewhere else, and the other fixed hopefully on the Chinese for whose trucks he wished to open a repair shop, while the brother-in-law studied tree-tops with zest as around these twined the rare orchids. "All we need to complete the outfit," he remarked wistfully, "is a bug-hunter with a net."

They not only lived in Burma; they loved her and their tales of her were legion. They told me of the Arakan hill tracts in the far north where the tribesmen are savage and naked, and game abounds, and white men walk gingerly through the jungle always on the alert for trouble; and of the two Europeans who spotted traces of gold in the vessels fashioned by a certain Shan people and therefore went deliberately to live in their State, becoming their blood brothers and allowing their cupidity to overcome the knowledge they must have had of Chinese far-sightedness. They died rather painfully from different and obscure diseases: the Shans kept the secret of their gold.

But as usual in Burma most of our conversation turned on the subject of the Buddhist priests and their eternal menace to the country's peace, and I was glad to learn that in several of the Shan States the rule of the Sawbwas definitely lessened the *hpoongyi's* power, for these "Lords of the Sunset" were in reality Mandarins and they brooked no interference—especially from the monasteries. Did the priests in a certain district show signs of arrogance the Sawbwa summoned them into his presence and demanded of each one exactly what his duties were. Those

who could not prove themselves worthy of their holy calling were promptly banished and their monasteries denuded of any treasures they had amassed, so the Shans did not suffer the fear complex so common among the Burmen, and even when the priests started one of their frequent rebellions against law and order, insisting it was written in the stars that the brown man should fight the white, there was a certain apathy among their followers so pronounced that revolt fizzled out like a damp squib.

IV

The couple from Kalaw rattled off in the Ford, and the Prussian departed for Rangoon in a cloud of curses, and I remained alone by the road, eating mangoes and dreaming of Yunnanfu. The drivers for the new buses arrived from China, and Mr. Wang of the sad face waited patiently for the British permit necessary for travelling the route to the frontier in the daytime, and the beaming Mr. Liu still greeted me cheerfully from his balcony. Nobody minded the delay, myself least of all, until the arrival of Joe Chow.

Looking back I realize that if this strangely galvanic young man had not suddenly descended upon Lashio I might yet be sitting somewhere on the Highway in the rain waiting to hitch-hike my way to Kunming. Joe was a wonder. He belonged to the China Travel Service, was busily planning new guest-houses all along the road, and was to become my dearest friend in China; but when he first strode into the bungalow and hustled me off to interview two Chinese who had munition convoys running to Wan Ting that night I felt almost resentful. Someday, somehow, I should travel through Yunnan province; why this indecent haste?

But by the time we had pounded down the hill and dragged Jehu from his filthy hovel Joe had infected me with some of his enthusiasm. "You see," he informed me in a strong American accent, "it's not a bit of use just waiting around. You've got your visa and a heap of introductions; I want to get home to my wife in Kunming—we were only married last month. Come on!"

The rest of that day was a confused jumble of innumerable cups of tea drunk in Chinese houses, of hopeful chases through the twisting lanes of Old Lashio, of sad disappointments when not a seat in any driver's cab was to be found. By nightfall I was as thrilled as Joe and, armed with the license and engine numbers of a truck, raced back to ask the British magistrate for a permit saying we might leave for the frontier the next morning. It was a Saturday and impossible to have copies of the permit sent out to the various officials along the Highway. "But come back first thing Monday morning and I'll write you out a pass saying that the truck, its driver and its load of cotton yarn are your own personal baggage," said the magistrate.

That sounded a grand idea to me, but Joe's fever to get off that night was unabated. Back we drove to Old Lashio and harried Mr. Chiu, agent to the Sawbwa of Mangshih, outside whose house a convoy was drawn up. "One seat only," he told us, "and no room for any luggage."

Joe and I had a free fight over that seat. He said it was no way for a European woman to travel, and what about my bedding, and how could I leave my suitcase behind? I said I could take the typewriter on my knee, and he could bring my gear on later, and that I refused to be thwarted. In the yellow headlights of the convoy we stood ankle-deep in the red mud and argued hotly until the arrival of Mr. Wang reminded me that I had most shamefully forgotten I was the guest of his Government and therefore was guilty of appalling discourtesy in striving to hop Chinawards in one of the Sawbwa's trucks.

"I bring good news," he said gently. "You will start in two days' time."

Our quarrel ended abruptly. Grinning at each other, Joe and I drank to the success of our journey from one of the Johnnie Walker bottles and pranced off to see Mr. Chu Ka Yian, who was building a Chinese Guest House. A man of vision, he foresaw the day when truckloads of rifles and explosives would yield place to busloads of foreign tourists on the Highway, and my one regret was that his tiny hotel would not open for another month, because there I could have stayed in a clean small room overlooking the colourful bazaar and slept and eaten contentedly for about six rupees a day—by this time I had discovered that admirable as the *durwan* was he had a gift for saying "soda-

water" and presenting me with large bills on which all I could read was the sum total in rupees. It was strange, therefore, to meet one who had no desire to make profit out of his guests, and Joc and I started arguing all over again about the lowness of the proposed charges, our attempts to reckon Chinese National dollars in terms of rupees being punctuated by Mr. Chu Ka Yian's suggestions as to the extra stores we should require for our journey. "Gin," he said decidedly. "If you will step across the street with me to the liquor store we will purchase a large bottle."

In vain I protested that tinned foods were far more important, that my stock of Burmese money was down to sixteen rupees, and that to spend eight of these upon gin was simply foolish. Mr. Chu Ka Yian led me firmly to the store where two Chinese boys had to remove the entire contents of the shelves (these consisted mostly of fiery red wine reminiscent of the "Red Biddy" sold in Scotland) in order to unearth the one elusive bottle of gin they possessed, while the genial proprietor looked on and informed me graciously, "As you have bought this nobody in Lashio will be able to buy gin for another two months. They will be very angry but I do not mind. Tell me, lady, why the makers call it 'Old Tom'?"

Mr. Chu Ka Yian saved me by rushing into an involved explanation that Tom in England was as common a name as Liu in China and that the adjective old meant honourable. Meekly I paid over ten rupees—two of the original eight proving bad as usual—stuffed "honourable Tom" into my Shan bag and returned to Joc.

I regret to say that "honourable Tom" never saw China, for late that night Miss Shan Ling Ngai arrived and at our party to welcome her we consumed him. Most of him, however, vanished down Chinese throats.

Miss Shan Ling Ngai's everyday name was Miss Wei. She was Superintendent of the Yuck Luck Girls' School in Rangoon and was journeying home to Hong Kong to see her family, who had moved to that city from devastated Canton, and as she had been staying at Maym-o with a Chinese relative who had a fruit farm there she had brought with her a huge basket into which I was to dip many times during the next three weeks. Everything fruity was in that basket. Giant plantains, large and very sweet

oranges, mangoes which dripped juice, rosy apples and bloomy peaches. Best of all were the *lichees*, those tiny fruits strangely resembling withered strawberries which, when peeled, reveal themselves as first cousins to the most aristocratic sort of grape.

Long after Mr. Wang, Mr. Chiu, Mr. Chu Ka Yian, Mr. Liu and Joe had departed, little Miss Wei and I sat eating *lichees* and talking of many things. Not given to casual friendships with other women, I knew at once that this Chinese woman and myself would hold between us a rare bond of companionship, and as I listened to her story, told in sparse English that rang with the strident open vowels of the Cantonese, I felt humble, for she had worked and suffered so much more than I had ever done.

"My father was a farmer near Canton," she said, "in the same village that sheltered our great leader, Dr. Sun Yat Sen, in his childhood. Always I liked the farm, wished to work upon it my life long, but because we in China set great store by brain knowledge I started school at four. It was a primary school, you understand, but when I was eight I went on to a higher school which had a very good method. Each year we studied one subject. First we studied history, then we studied the literature of our country in the time of Confucius, in successive years we followed the course of that literature down to the present day. When we were sixteen and our brains were slightly trained we began the study of mathematics, and when we were nineteen we concentrated upon the learning of foreign languages. I graduated two years ago," she finished simply. "I shall be twenty-seven next autumn and I feel I know so little."

She knew so little! She had spent twenty-one years in absorbing an education beside which the paltry knowledge of my elder son (whom heretofore I had regarded as being rather the cat's whiskers at scholastic prowess) was as nothing. But her voice went on:

"I wanted to teach in Canton, but the Japanese came. They did dreadful things. They made the—how do you call them?—unmentionable wounds on captives, they left little wounded children to die horribly, they turned our lovely city into a slaughter-house. Even our farm we burnt so that they could not touch it. So I went by sea to Rangoon and there I earn the

good salary, but my people had to flee to Hongkong, which is so crowded the Chinese say you cannot find house-room for a chicken. I go home now to see my young brother, who has been in a Californian University studying economics. He is my favourite amongst our large family and I have not seen him for seven years. Think of our meeting; will it not be exciting?"

Placidly she stripped another *lichee* of its prickly skin and chattered on about her brother. She hoped so much he would not join the Army, but his sense of patriotism burned strong within him. "We belong to the New Life Movement," she said. "It is not what you call an organization, you understand? One does not sign up for membership, one only strives to keep the rules expounded by the leaders—Madame Chiang Kai-shek is the greatest of those. It is forbidden to smoke, or to drink alcohol, or to spend money in foolish ways until the end of our war."

I said, "Joe Chow and the others; they are members of this movement?"

"Oh, yes," she bowed gravely.

"But they drank 'honourable Tom'?"

She smiled. "They were being polite to you, a stranger; besides, they are men."

"I see," I murmured. Most assuredly there was no single standard prevalent in China, but this New Life business interested me. I wanted to know how it really worked and if it had any basic effect upon its members. Was it just the kind of fanatical jingoism which is apt to assail a people in time of war, or was it the result of the slow, tortoise-like accumulation of Chinese knowledge through the centuries? It sounded an ideology strangely divorced from the beliefs of an ancient race, but before I could question Miss Wei concerning the movement she asked softly, "Why do you wish to travel our Highway? It is a rough journey for an Englishwoman; the sea passage to Indo-China is the more comfortable route."

As I had told Mr. S. C. Liu back in Rangoon, so I explained again how I had always wanted to visit China, and added, "You spoke of Sun Yat Sen just now and of what a great person he was. He laboured for a free, united China and he visualized this road which would lead across the mountains for over a thousand

miles. Well, his vision has become reality and if I travel it I may be able to glimpse a little of his philosophy."

She nodded her smooth dark head. "I understand and I feel you are right because too many foreigners merely visit Hong-kong and Shanghai and go home imagining they know China. Every day, you know, our school children repeat Sun Yat Sen's exhortations to the Chinese people, his 'philosophy' as you call it although that is a wrong description for the philosophy was in the heart of the humblest coolie before the days of Confucius. What Sun Yat Sen did was to draw it out, try to instruct every man, woman and child to practise their inherent belief that serenity of mind can only be gained by toiling for the land to which one belongs. The coolie with his paddy or bean patch, the schoolteacher with his books must work always for China's sake, never for their own."

Long after she had gone to bed I thought of her words as I did my nightly prowling in search of kraits lurking in the bathroom, bugs in the bed, mosquitoes in the netting. In fairness to the *durwan* I should explain my jumpiness sprang from a horrid moment the morning after my arrival when I peered over the side of my tin bath tub to discover a krait neatly coiled beside it and, deciding safety to be more important than modesty, screamed to him to kill the reptile, which he did most efficiently. Thereafter he and the sweeper kept such a good watch on my room that not even an ant disturbed my peace, but my memory of the krait died hard and on this particular evening it kept recurring as I tried to concentrate upon what Miss Wei had told me until I thought no longer of the Highway as a gloriously romantic road but as a fearful, snake-infested thoroughfare.

A thousand miles of snakes! I couldn't possibly endure it, and I should be entirely alone with a people who did not share my terror of these abominations but fixed their eyes on the ultimate emancipation of their country. Desperately I threw my mind back to everything which had nourished my longing to go to China from the delicious poem wherein a Chinese father voices the pious hope that his baby son will never lower the nobility of his ancestors by becoming Prime Minister to the day a few months ago when the magic words, "We'd better send you to China," spoken by Harold Latham, had sent me dancing out into the murk of a January evening in London;

but I simply could not recapture my enthusiasm for the journey which was now so close.

It wasn't only the snakes; all manner of other fears crowded in upon me. Kunming was such an awfully long way away, I should never begin to understand Chinese ways, I hated "movements" of any kind and the New Life one so praised by Miss Wei sounded particularly virulent. I remember sitting on the edge of my bed staring hopelessly at my odd assortment of gear and telling myself fiercely not to be such a fool, but my misery remained acute. Very probably my absurd mood was a natural reaction from the state of high excitement in which I had lived ever since signing my contract to write a book about South-Western China, but at the time I couldn't analyze it—I could only wallow in it, and by midnight I felt I simply *had* to knock up the British magistrate and inform him it was imperative I should return to Rangoon on the morrow. Seizing the torch I sped out and across the shadowy garden, but as I reached the gate several lorries lumbered past and in the glare of their headlamps the surface of the Highway gleamed redly.

Fear vanished as suddenly as it had come. Leaning against the gate-post I waited until the convoy had gone by, then I turned and walked slowly back to the bungalow. The Highway had got me.

V

Next morning Miss Wei breakfasted with me, politely spurning the *durwan's* new-laid eggs, and before we had finished our meal Joe and Mr. Chiu appeared with the news we were to go down to Old Lashio that evening, dine at the Chiu establishment and sleep in a new guest-house especially erected for our benefit alongside the Yunnan-Burma depot. The following dawn we should begin our drive into China.

I could not believe I had really felt the qualms of the previous night but spent a joyful morning repacking my baggage and then voyaged forth with Chiu to lunch in an astonishing eating-house which provided us with rice, rice and again rice but spoke in *Alice in Wonderland* fashion of noodles to-morrow. "To-night," said Chiu grandly, "we shall dine off sharks' fins."

I agreed dreamily and produced from the fastnesses of my person a safety-pin wherewith to pin a note to some absent Chinese nurses upon the bamboo door of their dwelling-house; but on our trudge back to the bungalow Chiu developed one of the sudden fits of melancholy for which, I was to learn, the Chinese are renowned. He was afraid we should disturb the gentle Mr. Wang by our intrusion that evening, he thought it would be ever so much better if we stayed at the bungalow and awaited the truck which would surely call for us if the convoy really *did* start the next morning, he felt sure that something, somehow, would prevent our journey from ever taking place.

Little Miss Wei grew quite agitated; I did not care very much because my bones told me that to-morrow would see me China bound, so recklessly I ordered Jehu to parade at six-thirty, galvanized Miss Wei into packing up her kit, and went to sleep for the afternoon. Lashio had suddenly lost all attraction for me; the real object of my travels beckoned, and before three days had passed I should see Salween.

I might have known such optimistic reckoning was bound to fail.

By seven o'clock we were snugly parked in Mr. Wang's delightful little hut, newly made by his workmen from spare packing-cases, decorated with legends extolling the worth of various brands of canned bamboo shoots prepared in—of all countries in the world—Japan! By the hissing light of an acetylene lamp I read these admiringly while Miss Wei unrolled her bedding and spread her quilted cotton mattress on the large dining-table, which was the sole article of furniture the hut contained. Glancing at my own comfortable cot-bed I remarked that the table would prove a hard resting-place and was incredulous when she gave a vehement denial. I did not know then how many times I was to roll on to just such a bed and let the comfort of it soothe my aching body.

Joe and Mr. Wang had departed on some matter of business. Awaiting their return we wrote letters, I sulkily and only from a sense of duty which attacked me because henceforth the mailing of correspondence would be a hit or miss affair; Miss Wei because she had a passion for letter-writing which was to survive even the rigours of the Yunnan-Burma Highway. Rather awed I watched her pen creating the Chinese characters with incredible

swiftness, each stroke sure and delicate, and remembered how I had once tried to learn Mandarin but given the task up in despair upon reaching the forty-fifth intonation of the vowel "a".

Presently she looked up. "I am so hungry," she said simply, and from the multitude of kitbags which composed her luggage she hauled forth a tin of water biscuits. These we crunched steadily until the others returned and Mr. Wang invited us to sup with him. "No" we regretted we had already promised Mr. Chiu, and scolding Joe for his unpunctuality we set off.

After the brilliance of the acetylene lamp the curving wynds of Old Lashio were black tunnels down which we floundered, stumbling over sleeping cattle, squelching into lakes of mud, running full tilt at last into what proved to be a large Chevrolet saloon standing outside Mr. Chiu's gateway.

"The Sawbwa's car!" whispered Joe. "He must have arrived without warning."

He had very much arrived. Enthroned in the one easy-chair in Mr. Chiu's half-sitting-room, half-workshop, he stared at us austere as we walked in, and as I studied the expressionless face that might have been sharp-fashioned out of golden wood by a sculptor my interest quickened. Around him was a clutter of dirty small Chinese children, empty petrol tins, a large motor-bicycle belonging to his younger brother and several platters of congealing chow; his thin little body was clad in a white duck suit of exquisite cut; in one slim golden hand he held a glass of whisky, yet the incongruity of his setting did not affect this proud Mandarin, this Sawbwa Fang of Mangshih whose kingly forbears had ruled the turbulent highwaymen of the mountains since the Ming dynasty.

There was cruelty in the tight-lipped mouth, intellect in the high golden forehead, sensuality in the wide flared nostrils, power in the oblique unwavering eyes. He bowed slightly as Mr. Chiu introduced me and gave me his hand. It was smooth and very cold. "When you pass through Mangshih I will show you my palace, my gardens and my tung oil plantation. Tell me, do you know to-day's American price for tung oil?"

It seemed an astonishing question from a man whose very presence transported one back thousands of years in time, but the Sawbwa, I was to discover, was a shrewd man of business and for the next hour he discussed the tung oil market while

we drooped on a hard bench opposite to him thinking unhappily of sharks' fins. In contrast to the coldness of his master, poor Chiu kept mopping a glistening brow, for the Sawbwa's wrath was a terrible thing to invoke and he expected his servants to perform miracles in the way of work.

Certainly he thought that I, as a writer, should be conversant with all the vagaries of tung oil prices, and when I could cope with these no longer I tried a red herring. "You know a friend of mine, H——, I think?"

The golden mask quivered into life. The Englishman I mentioned had stayed as the Sawbwa's guest a few months previously and was, I imagine, the only foreigner for whom he had regard. "His Mandarin is excellent," he said graciously, and unbent so far as to inquire if my Chinese visa were in order because if not he would issue me one himself. Scrutinizing my passport his manner changed, and with all the eagerness of a child he demanded that Joe should translate for him the wording on each visa, a hopeless task when we came to Arabic, Spanish and Siamese. He thought us stupid, said so bluntly, announced that he collected stamps and defeated me utterly by proceeding to detach a Sudanese one with his pen-knife.

At ten-thirty he dismissed us. "I shall now communicate with Rangoon by telephone," he informed me, "and I shall not forget to arrange for your entertainment in Mangshih."

Chiu and the brother looked acutely miserable. Their night's work would not end until dawn—if then. Obediently we bade them farewell and trooped out into a violent thunderstorm. Hunger was gnawing at us, the night was pitch dark, within two minutes we were soaked to the skin. There were no facilities for drying clothes at Mr. Wang's and we were due to start our journey at 5 a.m. Suddenly we all began to laugh. We had looked forward to those sharks' fins so much! Groping our way to an eating-house we scarified the obese proprietor by ordering double portions of everything.

Half an hour later I sat back replete and asked Joe, "Why has the Sawbwa's brother such a servile manner?"

"Because he is a younger son, a person of no importance. He is beholden to the Sawbwa for his least requirement and he works very hard lest his motor-bicycle is taken away from him. The Sawbwa," Joe finished with relish, "has eighteen Chevrolets.

Wait until you see his palace at Mangshih, full of priceless treasures."

I remembered the Mandarin's still golden face, the coldness of his hand, and the story H—— had told me of the death of his mother the previous year, when elaborate ceremonies had gone on for months and the old lady's body, embalmed in oil and honey, rested in the temple until the joss-man pronounced the gods' edict that it should be buried. Assuredly the Fang family had not altered one iota of their ways despite the eighteen Chevrolets, but what puzzled me was the difference between the Sawbwa and his brother, for the former looked and behaved like Royalty while the latter was a very scruffy object of definitely plebeian appearance.

"Probably," said Joe airily, "the brother's mother was a concubine."

We walked homewards through the beating rain to find a small figure in a white robe arguing with Mr. Wang. She was very young and sheerly beautiful from her flower-like face to her tiny, henna-nailed feet, and her husband, she said, was sick. He had almost died in Rangoon "through drinking too much liquor" and his one desire was to reach Mangshih, where he had a doctor friend. Might they therefore travel in one of the new buses?

Mr. Wang was doubtful. Only Joe, as representative of the China Travel Service, and myself, as honoured guest of the Chinese Government, were accorded the privilege of travelling the Highway at the moment.

"But there is also Miss Wei," I reminded him, and received the shock of my life when I learnt that the Chinese officials from Mr. Chen in Rangoon to a Director of the Highway in Yunnanfu had achieved Miss Wei so that she might act as chaperone to myself. "No European has yet journeyed over the road with a Chinese convoy," they said. "The few who have reached Yunnanfu have done so in their own cars or lorries."

I wondered sleepily if they had feared I might run amok by myself, but the wife of the sick man was now sobbing bitterly that her husband would never recover if he did not visit Mangshih.

"Nobody," remarked Joe sapiently, "lives longer than a week in Mangshih. Why take him there?"

In her agitation Miss Wei broke into the argument with a

flood of Cantonese speech. To console herself the wife lit a cheroot at which she puffed furiously. Mr. Wang capitulated, looking more harassed than ever, and Joe informed me solemnly that we must awaken at four-thirty sharp because to rouse anybody else from slumber in China was not only a breach of good manners but an act of ill-omen.

The thought that I might miss the bus for which I had waited so long through inability to rouse myself had such effect that I lay awake listening to the soft breathing of Miss Wei on the table beside me and to a mixture of outside sounds made by the drivers and mechanics as they prepared their vehicles for the morning. Predominant among these were a series of terrific gargles and expectorations so horrible to listen to that despite the clammy heat I tucked my blanket round my ears. I little realized that soon I was to grow so accustomed to these noises which form the *leit motif* to Chinese life that I was even to indulge in making them myself.

Chapter Three

INTO CHINA

I

UNDER the grey sullen sky the wheels of the convoy churned the mud into deep ruts as they backed and sidled into position, and despite the heavy white mist overhanging the road the eighteen blue and silver buses gleamed against the dark shapes of twelve new Bedford trucks. Up and down the queue rushed drivers and mechanics, a motley crew since their official green overalls had the trouser-legs rolled up to the knees and each man carried his entire wardrobe on his person, some wearing three layers of pullovers and others dirty white silk shirts that flapped in the dawn wind. Everybody shouted, gesticulated and spat; Mr. Wang kept glancing at his watch; two soldiers with rifles held at incredible angles galloped to and fro; the sick husband moaned as the boys jolted him past in a litter and bundled him carelessly into a bus; Miss Wei sat down on her assortment of kitbags and fell asleep again, first evidence of an attribute which was to earn for her the nickname of "dormouse". I had thought myself pretty good at sleeping anywhere or anyhow, but that girl had me beat. The beauty, the tragedy, the romance and the plagues of the Highway were to pass her by simply because she was never awake to greet them.

Somehow confusion straightened out and Mr. Wang escorted us to our bus at the head of the column. In the courtyard behind the Highway Offices this vehicle had entranced me; when I clambered up its high steps and sat down on a narrow seat I suffered disappointment. Beneath the blue rexine covering there was little or no padding; the long bar which formed a back-rest was made of cast-iron; behind me were packing cases of T.N.T.; my feet rested on a bunch of rifles. There was seating accommodation for fifteen passengers, but by the time Miss Wei, Joe and myself had bestowed ourselves and our belongings among the ammunition there didn't seem much room left.

The driver was long and lean with a remarkably un-Chinese face which would have been handsome had it not been deeply pitted with pock-marks, and I was introduced to him with ceremony by Mr. Wang. "Mr. Ching, your driver. He was in our army transport and escaped with his truck after the fall of Nanking. Four of his companions were not so fortunate; they were taken by the Japanese and——" The sentence finished in a series of gestures describing exactly how the enemy had mutilated their unhappy prisoners.

Ching and I studied each other with mutual interest. He had never seen a white woman before; I had never met a survivor of Nanking. Presently he grinned broadly and I grinned back, and when Joe told him my name he repeated it over and over again trying to achieve the correct pronunciation. The "Mrs." was beyond him; thereafter I was "Bigland" to Ching and, indeed, to most of the convoy drivers.

Mr. Wang glanced anxiously at his watch and hurried off. The smiling Mr. Liu drove slowly in a Ford between the two long lines of the convoy distributing piles of freshly-baked rolls, our share of which we tucked into the string racks above our heads. He was travelling in the rearmost truck, he assured us, in case of breakdowns, and his small daughter, aged eight, was to accompany him. (An astonishing child, Miss Liu. Thanks to constant troubles she and her parent did not reach Mangshih until a week later, yet the tiny creature appeared as perky as ever.)

Ching started his engine. We leaned out of the windows waving good-byes. The convoy jolted forward and I sat back with a sigh of relief. By nightfall I should be in China.

"Perhaps," added Joe softly.

For a brief eight miles our progress was majestic, all thirty vehicles lumbering along at a steady twenty miles an hour. Certainly we had to endure continuous bumping, but the beauty of the road made up for that slight discomfort, because on either side of it rose the blossoming jungle trees and bushes, mosaics of loveliness in the dawn light, and ahead of us the mountains we were to climb showed wine-dark against the rosy sky.

Suddenly we slowed down to a mere crawl—we had come to the end of what guide-books to the Northern Shan States term "the excellent asphalt surface of the road." Ching curled bare

prehensile toes round the pedals and bent above the wheel, while behind him we and our baggage were tossed about like so many corks, and the rifle cases thudded ominously on the floor. Joe gasped that the surface improved again after the Chinese border, but that was a good hundred kilometres away and meantime our bodies were being battered to such an extent that there seemed a doubt as to whether we should survive until Wan Ting. Everything in that bus was hard; the roof on which we caught the bridges of our noses, the seats on to which we ricocheted violently, the window-frames on which we banged our shoulders, and from the racks fell Mr. Liu's rolls to hit various portions of our anatomy with resounding thuds.

Presently the rain came to add to our misery, the hot, driving monsoon rain which swirled through the open windows to drench us before Joe and I could manage to shut it out, because each time we grasped a window the bus gave a lurch that sent us flying backwards on to Miss Wei, who still slept, sometimes right side up, sometimes upside down, through all our acrobatics.

I think it was sight of such oblivion that made me curse myself a second time for attempting this Chinese journey, but now I was not afraid, only angry. It had been a crazy idea anyway—and this was only the first morning! At the rate at which we were travelling we should be in our dotage before we reached Yunnanfu. If Joe or Ching spat just once more I should scream. "Tell me some English sayings," howled the former above the drum-fire of the rifle cases. "I collect the sayings of all nations."

Even my voice ached as I told him the only one I could remember:

"A woman, a dog and a walnut tree,
The more you beat them the better they be."

He was immensely pleased and repeated it slowly, expectorating between each phrase, and as I wreathed my arms round the back of the seat in front in an effort to defy the antics of the bus I thought grimly it was a remarkably suitable rhyme for present circumstances and that if it came true I should emerge shrivelled mentally, morally and physically in far Kunming.

At that moment Ching stopped his engine, turned round and

smiled gently. The truck ahead of us was bogged in the sticky mud. We crawled out into the pitiless rain to inspect the damage and found her axle-deep in a glutinous red lake, while around her milled a dozen or so drivers, all roaring with laughter, who gave me my first lesson in the superb philosophy of the Chinese. This stoppage might well mean a long delay in bad weather, but it was treated as a huge joke, and every one rolled up their trousers and paddled knee-deep in the slime, giving silly little pushes to the back of the truck and occasionally splashing to the roadside, where they picked twigs and poked them at the "touch-me-not" plants that curled up their tiny fronds at the slightest tap. My body was one long bruise, my head ached, drips from my sodden clothing trickled down my legs. I said to Joe, "Aren't they going to do anything about it?"

He looked puzzled. "There is no hurry. Perhaps Mr. Liu will catch us up if he has not had a breakdown also. He has some tools, I believe. Come, let us have some food."

Crouching morosely on a sandstone boulder I ate one of the tough rolls while Joe operated on mangoes with his pen-knife. Below a leaden sky the teak trees drooped in the rain. Behind us was the solid line of the convoy—Mr. Liu would have a long walk should he be somewhere behind it, for it blocked the entire width of the road. Not one of the trucks or buses carried so much as a jack in the way of tools and nobody had a rope. My cup of woe spilled over when Miss Wei appeared on the bus-step, newly awakened and radiant in a fresh robe. "Such a good sleep!" she cooed.

It was too much. Seizing my bottle of arnica I squelched through the jungle, stripped off my soaking garments and anointed my bruises.

On my return I shared the boulder with one of the guards, a jolly small man whose people had migrated to the Philippines. Born in Manila, he had never seen China until he answered her war call to her sons, and his halting English was sprinkled lavishly with a swear-word unused in polite society. "My father not know China, I not know China, but I belong. She send for me to fight this—war, I come. F—the Japanese, my father say. I corporal, see my—uniform?"

I glanced uneasily at the rifle which swung carelessly over his shoulder and was pointed straight at me. "Is that rifle loaded?"

"It — well is," he replied with dignity.

"Then please put the safety-catch down."

He looked as though he might explode with rage. Of what use was it for a soldier of China's army to put the safety-catch on his rifle when he might need to fire it at any moment? We in the West had no idea of war, but he — well had, and his duty was to guard the convoy with every ounce of his energy!

Through the veil of rain I espied several hurrying figures, felt sure for a frantic moment they were Japanese, knew relief when Mr. Liu's smile flashed like a beacon in the greyness. "Three other mishaps," he shouted. "Two buses with engine trouble and one truck is lost."

"How can a truck be lost?" I asked Joc.

"Easy. Sometimes on a hill section a landslide carries it down the precipice and buries it."

"But the drivers?"

"They die." His shrug added, "What is life anyway?"

II

By mid-afternoon three more cases of bogging had occurred, two buses had conked out altogether and our progress had degenerated into a perilous shuffle for we were in the hills now and the road was a thin red ribbon snaking along steep, jungle-clad slopes down which the foaming waterfalls carried branches, boulders and sometimes whole tree trunks. But the rain had ceased, and so glorious was this mountainous country that the frequent stoppages, the joltings of the bus, the minor landslides which had to be shovelled aside, and the discovery we had left our tin-opener behind in Lashio and therefore had to stay our growing hunger with fruit, did not matter. Ching drove marvellously despite ruts and impossible gradients, while the corporal clung monkey-wise to the running-board, and we puffed grandly into the hill-village of Hsinwi conscious that our weaker brethren were still labouring far behind us.

According to Joe there was an excellent eating-house, but when we had ploughed through the mud we found that yesterday's convoy had eaten all its food, so over comforting bowls of

green Yunnan tea we discussed the possibility of buying a tin-opener in Hsinwi. We had set ourselves no light task. The one street was lined with Indian and Shan bazaars which all possessed stalls heaped with metal contrivances of all descriptions from candlesticks to curtain-rings—there were electric light fittings too that seemed strangely out of place in this village where a paraffin lamp was an event, but our rummagings failed to unearth a tin-opener until Miss Wei decided to buy Joe's wife a set of aluminium steamers and the object of our search fell out of one of the lids.

We gazed admiringly at such sleight of hand and Joe exclaimed in a rapt voice, "Just think, you are the only European who can ever say she bought a tin-opener in Hsinwi!"

Brushing aside this claim to fame I floundered back to the bus and dug out a large tin of sardines which we ate crudely but enjoyably in our fingers, and although my three companions protested with each mouthful that they detested foreign fish I noticed they mopped up the oil with pieces of roll. Opposite us a crowd gathered, and the women among it came forward and fingered my hair, my khaki shirt and my bare arms. (Indeed, the only parts of me they left untouched were my feet, which were shod in the Shan shoes bought in Old Lashio bazaar.) "To them you are a foreign devil," said Joe with relish; then his business acumen came uppermost. "You ought to charge them ten cents a look."

Kachins they were, these folk, the real highwaymen of the road who feared nobody and secreted somewhere about their small wiry persons long and exceedingly sharp knives; but to us they were friendly enough although during our journey through their country I never saw one smile and to look pleasantly at them was an effort because almost all of them possessed gigantic goitres which hung flaccidly on their chests.

The proprietor of the eating-house refused payment for our copious draughts of tea because "he too came from Canton", and we packed into the bus once more and lurched on towards Kutkai.

Our route was even rougher than before and the heavens poured torrential rain as we spiralled up and down the narrow passes, but I was settling down in our travelling home. The pillow and a blanket from my bedding softened the bumps

administered by each jolt, between Miss Wei and myself was the basket of fruit, beside me was my Shan bag containing my modest toilet needs, and I had eaten. Emulating the example of my Cantonese companion, I slept.

I awakened to darkness and the steady drip-drip of rain. "Our lights have gone," said Joe's voice, "and I cannot find your torch."

Struggling upright I gasped as a stream of icy water cascaded down my back. "The roof leaks," murmured Miss Wei.

She was right. The water was pouring through the two ventilators, but of infinitely more importance was the missing torch which I discovered at last wrapped up in a spare shirt and held while Ching wrestled with the batteries, finally achieving a thin flicker of light from either headlamp.

"Are we near Wan Ting?"

Joe laughed. "We have not yet reached Kutkai. By the way, do you know there are two hundred and seventy-nine bridges on this section of the road, and most of them can stand five-ton loads?"

I wasn't the least interested. All my energies were concentrated in trying to cover the ventilators with my mackintosh, but fortunately Ching came to my rescue with a courtly bow and the offer of a huge and decrepit black umbrella, under which I sat solemnly as we jogged on through the night.

It was nine o'clock when we pulled up in Kutkai. "We shall stay overnight here," announced Joe, and my spirits rose, for all day he had regaled me with accounts of the delightful hostels run by the China Travel Service. Visions of a hot bath danced before me as I asked him to help me out with my bedding.

"But you do not need that. We sleep in the bus."

I was bone weary; everything I touched was wet; when I got out of the bus I stood ankle-deep in a puddle, and a suddenly brisk Miss Wei besought me to hurry up as the remainder of the convoy were arriving and there was only one eating-house. Following her through the mire I reflected that existence in the Lashio *dak* bungalow had been sybaritic compared to this, but as we entered a warm, low-roofed room I realized my basic needs had dwindled to one—food.

Our table was cluttered with dirty plates and small heaps of gristle, the other drivers crowded around us, the perspiring cook

ladled out meat and noodles from a vast copper under which a wood-fire glowed, everything was dirty and every one was cheerful. I ate as I had seldom eaten and fell asleep against Ching's shoulder until he shook me awake, handed me my sponge-bag and pushed a basin of hot water towards me. I handed him my soap, he retaliated with his nail-brush. Together we scrubbed our arms, necks and faces; then put the basin on the floor and squeezed our four sore feet into it while all over the room our companions also washed, for the humblest Chinese coolie has a passion for cleansing his extremities—and his teeth. (The water supply having given out we cleaned ours with a subtle mixture of tea and tooth-paste, but that was a mere detail.)

Back in the bus we had a fierce argument as to whether we should close the windows against bandits or leave them open to mosquitoes and chose the latter alternative, with the result I awakened at dawn to find my limbs starred with what looked uncommonly like a measles rash. But sleep had been sweet and dreamless, and by the time Joe and Ching had uncoiled themselves from the partitioned-off baggage compartment where they had rested, Miss Wei and I were searching for bowls of morning tea.

We found these in a curious bazaar consisting of a long veranda, half of which held an enormous high bed where four Chinese lay snoring. The other half was stacked with tinned goods and underneath the bed was a miniature zoo proudly displayed by the proprietor, who hauled forth first a baby gazelle, then a bedraggled peacock, and finally a cross between a goat and a sheep, at which we stared amazedly.

"What is the English for that?" pointed Miss Wei.

"A geep," I suggested feebly, but when Joe came up and inquired the price of the creature, as he wished to buy it, I protested.

"You are very stupid," he told me severely. "Why in Kunming I could sell the animal for an excellent price. This man only wants two rupees for it—think of the profit we should make?"

"I couldn't travel with that—that abortion beside me all the time."

Too late had I remembered the Chinese determination to

learn the meaning of every fresh English word. He and Miss Wei whirled on me: "What is an abortion?"

Until we reached the frontier some three hours later our conversation buzzed with obstetric detail.

"And now," said Joe as we stopped at the Junction to fill up with petrol, "the officials will argue about your passport. They are not used to people of your race and will probably not let you pass."

Anxiously I stared out at the track leading northwards to Musé, at the carelessly hidden petrol dumps, at a group of small and earnest-faced men in blue uniforms. "If there's any risk of their turning me back say I am Ching's wife."

Ching was highly delighted when Joe interpreted this remark. "Tell her she may call herself my mother if she wishes."

I felt slightly ruffled for he could not have been five years younger than myself; but Joe explained he was "rather bad on ages," and the Customs men barely glanced at me, so I consoled my hurt with *lichees* and taught Joe the words of "The Lambeth Walk" as it was Ching's favourite tune.

So we rollicked through a clear bright morning to Wan Ting, and always ahead of us the red ribbon of the Highway zigzagged up and down the crests of the green wooded hills. Flame of the Forest trees glowed beside us, belladonna leaves shone in the sunlight, the whole jungle glittered with jewel-like blooms, spiralling down a long valley we saw a huddle of grey roofs far below and a queer excitement filled me—at last I was near to China.

I sat in a shed while a dapper little Chinese studied my passport. The only thing in it he could read was my visa, issued in Rangoon, so the job did not take him long and he amused himself by putting a selection of Chinese stamps on the few available pages. "He says these will save you the necessity of having any more examinations throughout China," translated Joe.

"But doesn't he wish to examine my baggage?"

"Oh, no. He knows you are a friend."

And every one had told me how difficult it was to enter China! I might have had bombs in my suitcases for all the little man knew, but he shook me warmly by the hand and escorted me back to the bus. "Cawfee?" he inquired tenderly, and brought us steaming cupfuls of what I strongly suspected

to be burnt ground rice. "You will write the nice things about our country now," said Miss Wei placidly, and I wondered how any one could write nastily about a race so innately courteous. She, Joe and Ching had welcomed me, a foreigner, so simply. My habits, especially as regards washing and the smearing of my person with a citronella preparation which kept even Chinese insects from biting me unduly, must have offended them greatly, yet they never once betrayed their annoyance. They answered my innumerable questions politely, saw to my comfort in a hundred little ways, treated me without the least constraint.

For my part I was content. The Chinese were regarded as inscrutable; these folk were happy and laughter-loving, kindly and serene. Their table-manners were not mine and their constant belchings and expectorations had temporarily affronted me; but such minor things could not mar the real affection I was developing for them. Before the end of our journey that affection was to grow so firm that when I stepped back into a world of Europeans I was to feel lonely, almost afraid.

We moved forward through two lines of lounging guards and began to climb the mountainside. So often when one crosses a frontier with eagerness one is disappointed because the new country looks so depressingly like the country left behind, but as I leaned far out of my window I knew that China had not failed me—she was completely different from the Shan States. Instead of jungle were terraced paddy fields, in place of tangled knotty creepers were stretches of sweet meadow land starred with orchids and multitudes of Chinese lilies, through the valley beneath curved a lazy river which gleamed rosy in the sun and above it darted myriads of brilliantly coloured birds. And everywhere, their grey-green spears relieving the high colour of the landscape, grew the cactus plants. They made protecting hedges for the paddy-fields, they fringed the river, they ringed the meadows. They did even more than that; they symbolized China, these cacti that hid beneath their cruel spikes the power of putting forth each year a single, exquisite flower.

We gained the shoulder of the mountain range where the air was clear and exhilarating and looked down on the fairest valley of Yunnan, its emerald paddy-fields broken by reed-bordered lakes of sheerest blue. Dropping towards it we saw

yet more birds, herons, flamingoes, storks, egrets and a host of flashing feathered unknowns which wheeled and darted round the shining lakes, while through the paddy lumbered the sleek grey water-buffalo driven by blue-clad coolies, and along the road came a long train of high-stepping ponies, bundles of goods on their backs. Gazing at the caravan I thought that was the real way to travel in China and felt ashamed of our snorting bus, which assuredly had no connection with this age-old land.

But glory could not last. As we began to climb again, so the black clouds rolled swiftly up the sky blotting out all vision of beauty and once again the dreaded monsoon rain beat down relentlessly, squashing lilies and orchids to a pulp and driving the birds from the little lakes. The road ceased to be a road, turned into a nightmare of ruts and quagmires hung perilously between mist and precipice. Ching clung to the wheel, we clung to any handy piece of the bus, the gears rattled and the engine roared and the radiator boiled, but up we went and up through the rains, gained a brief respite on a mountain-top, plunged again into a dark swirl of cloud.

The storm had abated by the time we neared Che'fann, the first Chinese town on the Highway. Seen from across the valley its ancient grey walls looked alluring, and I stared indignantly at Joe when he said it would be impossible to stop there. "Wait until you see it," he added grimly as we swayed along a near canal and entered the city gate.

Impossible to describe Che'fann. Inhabited by Shans, it had originally been a remote small town, but China's war had brought to it a sudden and false prosperity. Each day fresh lots of convoy drivers poured into it demanding food, tobacco and lodgings, with the result that prices were prohibitive, food practically non-existent, and living conditions appalling. The streets were seas of mud and so narrow that we could almost have shaken hands from the bus with the gaunt, goitrous inhabitants, who leaned apathetically from their windows. Filthy bits of paper, trodden cigarette cartons, heaps of refuse and literally millions of black pigs were everywhere and the stench was dreadful.

We saw five funerals as we passed through the city—and that was a poor number for Che'fann, because it lay in the fever-belt

which stretches from the border to beyond Lungling; but what disturbed me was the fact that its citizens did not seem to care about life, death, cleanliness—or their pigs.

"Why should they?" demanded Joe. "They are Shans, you understand, not true Chinese, and all they care for is the knife in the back. Many Chinese transport companies had offices here but had to move them because of robberies and murders."

Certainly these people looked capable of any crime and it was a relief when Ching managed to lurch past another convoy and reach open rising ground once more. I glanced back as we neared the hill-top. Nobody would have believed the horror and decay lurking behind the walls which now gleamed pearly in a burst of sunshine, and on a giant forest-fig beside them the egrets feasted on the fruit in such numbers that they resembled huge clusters of white blossom. "What is Mangshih like?" I asked Joe suddenly.

His face grew grave. "They call it the place of death."

I sat back, a trifle awed. I was just beginning to learn how close beauty lay to tragedy in China.

III

Mangshih was some forty kilometres away; it might have been four hundred. The bus crawled up mountains much as a fly crawls up a wall, every mile or so Joe and I had to help Ching roll great boulders from the road, every few minutes we overtook gangs of coolies clearing landslides, odd hunched figures in their wide-brimmed hats and shaggy capes made from bark-cloth. Miss Wei still slumbered peacefully, oblivious of the rain-drips which streamed on to her person from Ching's umbrella, and above our heads a mighty storm thundered through the sky. We were stiff, tired and hungry, and to add to our dejection Ching began to croon the Manchurian soldier's lament for the loss of his country, surely the saddest wail of any exile. The song was endless and in each note of it was such longing for a captured land that one did not need to understand the words, although Miss Wei had translated them for me and as Ching chanted I tried to fit a rough English version to the tune:

"My home has gone,
My Mother lies broken on the ground,
My Father slaves for his oppressors.

My home has gone,
My beasts lie dead in stable or byre,
My grain fills the enemy's greedy belly.

My home has gone . . ."

Always that pathetic reiteration, "*My home has gone.*"

"Tell him to sing another song," I implored Joe, whereupon Ching shook off tragedy with a twist of one shoulder and started to shout the rousing march of Chiang Kai-shek's guerrilla armies.

We perked up at that and felt further cheered when a returning convoy swept crazily downhill towards us, the empty trucks swinging to the very lip of a deep gorge in their efforts to avoid us. They must have come from Mangshih; therefore we could reach that dubious spot before nightfall. "Cigarettes!" roared the drivers as they careered past us, and we threw fistfuls into the backs of the trucks then, with an inconsequence which reminded me of Russia Joe turned, "Do you advocate breast-feeding for babies?"

"Yes."

His bespectacled eyes grew very round. "But it is so bad for the mother!"

Feeling exactly like "Nurse So-and-So" on a twopenny women's paper I championed the cause of natural feeding for the young, but he still looked doubtful. "My wife says it is a wrong thing, but then she has not been married very long and she does not wish children. For myself I think we shall have two little girls. Tell me, do you approve of contraception?"

Trying to explain Western methods of birth control to an earnest member of the China New Life Movement was no easy task and I was floundering hopelessly when the engine coughed, sighed and died on us, and we began to slide gently backwards down a one in three gradient.

"Just fancy," said Joe brightly, "we have run out of petrol."

Miss Wei blinked the sleep from her eyes. "Why have we stopped; is it supper time?"

Almost I wept. Ahead of me loomed another night in the bus, another tin of sardines, another mosquito invasion, and fury rose in me at the incredible stupidity of the Chinese. Why hadn't they given us some extra tins at the Junction? Why didn't they run their buses in before sending them out on to this fabulous Highway? Why didn't they carry tools, ropes and spare parts? If we had not had to remove landslides and succour half the convoy we should have been in Mangshih ere this. I was about to voice these thoughts when I caught sight of Ching's face. He looked more melancholy than I had thought a human being could look and he was talking rapidly to Joe, who seemed extremely worried.

"Ching says we cannot stay here; there are evil bandits."

For the first time I glanced at our surroundings. On the right towered sandstone cliffs; on the left thick jungle fell sheer to a hissing river somewhere in the depths of a gorge, but perched on a jutting shelf of rock about twenty feet below road level was a collection of decrepit bamboo huts on stilts and from one of these popped a small hillman in a ragged dark blue bolero and skirt. Skipping up the slope he stopped about ten yards from the bus, bright eyes scrutinising us from the mass of tangled hair which fell over his face, brighter knife shining from his wide belt.

Joe nudged me. "They *throw* those," he whispered, "and when darkness comes they make raids on all travellers."

I looked up at Ching. He was literally trembling with fear and his face was grey. The whole thing struck me as being quite absurd. Knife or no knife the hillman was so tiny I could have thrown him across my shoulder with the greatest of ease, yet here was this man of over six feet who had been through the siege and fall of Nanking behaving like a terrified child because he was faced with this one little enemy. Levering myself half out of the window I made a grimace at the hillman, clapped my hands and shouted "Shoo!" With a wild leap he turned and scuttered back to his hut. "There you are," I said to Joe.

But he and Ching promptly descended into a bottomless pit of despair. How dared I do such a thing? There was no saving us now, for the whole wrath of the gods would descend upon us because of my action.

"Don't be so silly."

"It is not silly. These men are the highwaymen, the bad

spirits of the road. You do not know what tremendous powers they possess."

I stared at him reprovingly. "Yet you say you are a Christian?"

He had the grace to blink, but explained so quickly awful details of the Shan's habits that I realized his conversion had not touched the basic beliefs he had inherited from his many ancestors.

We relapsed into our respective corners, gloom enwrapping us, and for me the last straw was the discovery that owing to my lavish doling out of cigarettes I had none left. That settled it. "Why can't we walk on to Mangshih? We can't be farther than fifteen kilometres away?"

Joe clutched Ching. He had never heard of such a terrible idea! Dusk would fall in another hour and we should be caught alone and unprotected on the Highway! "Think of my wife and your children," he finished dramatically.

I glanced towards Miss Wei and envied her wholeheartedly. Not for her the burden and heat of the day; curled in her corner she slept unconcernedly. Thereafter I made my peace with Ching through playing a game of dominoes I did not understand in the least, and just as the shadows crept down the mountains we heard the hum of an engine.

In a second the three of us were out in the road, waving frantically at a truck which came chugging up the hill. It didn't belong to our convoy—presumably that was still negotiating Che'fann streets—but to a firm of Armenian contractors who carried arms for the Chinese, and from it leapt a Filipino with a flashing smile and a jaunty beret, which he removed politely. "Can I help you, Madam?"

I giggled weakly. His gallantry seemed so odd on this remote mountain-side, so far removed from superstitions and evil men with knives. "Can you please sell me a can of petrol?"

"Aw, hell, Madam, d'you know what you're asking?"

"For half your kingdom, I expect, but unless we get it we'll have to stay here all night."

Here Joe burst into a volley of explanation and from behind the Filipino came a tall bearded Sikh and a jovial looking Punjaubi. "An English lady," announced the Sikh precisely, "is very rare in these parts."

But the Filipino was listening open-mouthed to Joe's description of the terrors that beset the Highway by night. "I surely can't leave you here, Madam, but you see, it's this way. I'm head driver and I've got just enough gasoline to take me to Pao Shan and if my boss back in Rangoon finds one tin missing he'll go hay-wire. So what am I to do? If I give you a can I plain can't replace it for there ain't a damn' place I can buy it."

In the pelting rain we argued. "But it is only for an hour or two until we reach Mangshih. If you give me a can now I'll see you get one back this evening from the Yunnan-Burma dump there."

He brightened, jumped into the bus and inspected our empty tins. "No go, Madam. We run on Shell and you've got B.O.C.¹ That means you'll have to give me back a can my old man will spot in a second—and I'll go out on my neck."

Mendaciously I assured him that the Yunnan-Burma dump boasted Shell spirit and finally he sent the Punjaubi back for the precious juice. "Of course, I shouldn't do it, but I'll always take a chance for a lady. No I wouldn't touch your money, Madam, put it away. Say, where are you bound for?"

"Yunnanfu."

"Well if you aren't the luckiest guy! Years now I've itched to see China—and this is my first trip beyond Mangshih. I wish the hell I was coming with you! Can you buy me some badges in Yunnanfu? You know, the Chinese army badges. I guess I kinda collect them—and mind your step with these Johns, won't you?" he nodded towards Joe and Ching.

The Sikh saved my embarrassment by interrupting this tirade. "This transaction is highly irregular. We must insist upon the English lady procuring for us an official receipt."

"Aw, shucks!" said the Filipino, "cut him out, Madam, he's nuts."

But the Sikh was adamant. He was ancient and he clung tenaciously to his nominal position as overseer of his convoy. Desperately I fished in my bag and drew out the first paper I felt. It was a receipted bill from the Hotel Cecil in Alexandria but it obviously impressed the Indian for he tucked it into the Norfolk jacket he wore above his robes and bowed three times. The

Filipino winked; I winked back. "I'll be seeing you," he yelled as Ching threw in the gears.

The petrol episode had restored the prestige I had lost by my rude behaviour to the Shan; the road suddenly left the mountains and ran across a fog-bound plateau; I braced both feet against a rifle case and dreamed pleasantly of the guest-house in Mangshih.

Dusk was falling as we bumped uneasily over a series of log bridges and stopped short of a barrier bristling with soldiers and bobbing lanterns, and in the failing light I saw that to right and left of us were huge camps ringed around with barbed wire. Nobody bothered about my papers, but there was a great fuss over the unloading of some of our armaments, and as I drowsed in my corner a figure popped its head through the window next to me. Its face was Chinese, its voice good American. "Say, lady, d'you wanna' buy a coffin for eight bucks?"

I jumped. "Why on earth should I buy a coffin?"

"Because you'll surely need it. I guess you've heard of the poison gases that rise out of the ground here during the rainy season? Well, believe me you just can't fight against them; three days and you're a gonner. Listen, I sell cheap. If you wait till you're dead they'll put a fast one over on your relatives and make them pay . . ."

But I could bear no more. Summoning the faithful Joe I asked him to tell the face to go away.

He looked surprised. "He's quite right. Why, I have to keep changing my staff at the guest-house every few weeks since they cannot live in this climate. I think it would be a good idea to purchase the coffin—if you should not require it you can always resell at a profit."

Fortunately we lurched onwards at that moment, but as I peered out at Mangshih's main street my apprehensions quickened. The shops were closely shuttered and between them and the narrow mud lane we travelled were rows upon rows of trucks. The din was appalling, for Ching kept blowing his Klaxon in an effort to dislodge cattle, goats, chickens and some black objects from our path while all these creatures shrilled protest. I peered more closely at the black objects and Joe followed my gaze. "You complained about the pigs in Che'fann; they are as nothing to the pigs in Mangshih. But look, here is the guest-house."

It was a tumble-down, two-storied building, with a narrow

balcony running along its upper half, and it had been presented to a grateful Travel Service with much pomp by Sawbwa Fang, who had thereupon regretted such generosity and charged them rent ever since. By way of a *douceur*, however, he sent a gardener at intervals to plant bushes in the mud flats which fronted it, but as these were promptly eaten by cattle or pigs and the Sawbwa always demanded payment for them the scheme was scarcely successful. The ground-floor was a jumble of shavings, half-finished furniture, pots of paint, ladders and Chinese who were hammering away for dear life in the fitful light of tallow dips. A boy seized my typewriter and bounded up the biggest ladder with the agility of a goat. "Missie upstairs," he chanted. "I speak English. I been boy in Canton Hotel."

He was, I discovered, the only alive thing in Mangshih. On the balcony the manager and the accountant drooped over a little table, barely raising their heads to welcome us. In the white light from an acetylene lamp they looked ghastly. Their eyes were sunken, the parchment-tinted skin was drawn taut across the high cheek-bones, their bodies were incredibly thin and their hands were hot and dry to the touch.

"The cook is very sick," moaned the manager, "so there is no food."

"Ah," answered Joe briskly, "but I have brought you a fine present," and he dumped two packets of Lyons tea on the table.

The accountant actually raised a ghostly smile and I marvelled for the fiftieth time why it was that a race who produced the most fragrant tea in the world should so love the common or garden Indian variety. But the smile did not last. "And there are no rooms," he said, and flopped forward once more.

At last the energetic Joe breathed sufficient life into the manager to induce him to see what could be done about rooms, and he stumbled along the balcony, groaning as he went that the Vice-Director of the Highway, Mr. Tsing te Hiu, had the only available bed. "For I had to give up a room to the cook," he wailed. "The boys refuse to sleep with him. He is paralysed and is dying."

"What is in here?" demanded Joe, opening the door of the end room.

"Stores," replied the manager vaguely. "No use for ladies."

Miss Wei, now passionately awake, rated him in Cantonese,

and howled to the boy to bring up our baggage. "It is a grand room, is it not?" she asked, turning to me.

It was a palace compared to our bus. In one corner were piles of spittoons reaching to the ceiling; against the rear wall towered crazy heaps of plates, cups and saucers; most of the remaining floor-space was occupied by a vast bed on which was about a ton of the teased cotton-yarn the Chinese use to stuff their quilts. Joe fumed because all these things had been sent from Kunming months ago and nobody had bothered to do anything about them, but Miss Wei and I borrowed twig brooms from the boys and swept vigorously until he disappeared coughing in a cloud of dust.

We then put up my cot-bed. Both it and our rolls of bedding were soaked through, but we were beyond bothering over trifles and our crowning effort was to rearrange the teased cotton and spread Miss Wei's quilt atop it so that she might sleep in the biggest feather-bed ever.

Joe reappeared. "Would you like a bath?"

I couldn't believe him. Clutching the necessary gear I galloped after him down to the kitchen quarters, where the boy from Canton was struggling with a dozen large pots on a stone plate under which an enormous fire blazed. The bathroom was a narrow slip separated from the kitchen by a knee-high wall and wedged firmly into it was a long black object. I said: "That is a coffin."

"Do not worry," answered Joe blithely, "it has been painted."

I undressed under difficulties, acutely conscious that the cook-boy, who was negligently picking his teeth with a fork, was enjoying his first experience of strip-tease; then I wriggled myself into the bath. The water was hot and glorious. I lay back happily for a few moments, realized I needed a good scrub and attempted to sit up.

I couldn't; I had stuck to the new black paint!

The things I said about Joe and his coffin-bath are unrepeatable. It took me a full half-hour in steadily cooling water to detach myself and quite a lot of my skin was left behind in the process. Piebald and sore I dried and dressed gingerly, then staggered forth to meet the bland smile of the boy. "Your legs are not clean," he said.

I tried to look dignified. "Where is the lavatory?"

"Eh?"

I tried again. "The toilet?"

"Ah!" He seized the lamp from its hook, assuring me he could cook in the dark, and led me across a filthy muddy yard to a door in the wall. Flinging this wide he held the lamp high, revealing a morass surrounding a hole in the ground in which reposed a very dead goat. There was a rustle and a series of grunts—the Mangshih pigs were at their loathsome meal. I turned and fled back to the sanctuary of the kitchen. "Is there no other toilet?"

He shook his head; then nodded violently. "Wait, Missie!" Diving into a corner he produced, of all things, a spittoon.

"Eggs," Joe announced as I regained the balcony, "are sixty cents apiece here, chicken five dollars, vegetables impossible to buy. There are all the soldiers, the transport officials and the truck drivers to feed, you see, and the town is very poor."

"But the Sawbwa is very rich," I remarked acidly.

He looked shocked. "What can the Sawbwa have to do with the food of ordinary people?"

Personally I thought he ought to have quite a lot to do with it, but refrained from saying so, and buried my nose in a bowl of rice. It was hard and greyish in appearance, and the only flavourings to it were ancient eggs floating in a gluey liquid, soya sauce and tiny pieces of some pungent-tasting meat, while the manager and the accountant lapped so steadily from the centre bowl of soup that nobody else had a sup of it. Still, rice is filling and by the time I had demolished a second bowlful I felt almost human. "Mangshih does not seem so bad," I said graciously, but the manager spat with astonishing accuracy at a passing cow and bade me wait until I saw the place in daylight.

"Now we set to work," said Joe, as tea and hot towels for our hands and faces were passed round. Leaning against the balcony rail I thought what an efficient, magnetic creature he was. Even in the lurching bus he had been busy with the affairs of the different guest-houses and now he was not only flogging his own tired mind to extricate order out of chaos in Mangshih but actually galvanizing his sick helpers into doing so also. Out came the ledgers, the strings of counting-balls, the papers covered with meticulously made Chinese characters. Off came his coat and on popped a pair of different spectacles. He would sit there,

I knew, until he had satisfied his orderly mind that all details were straight.

"Shall we go to bed, dormouse?" I inquired, and Miss Wei nodded.

Heaving her atop of her monstrous bed was a work of art, for she was little over five feet in height and had to balance on my shoulders, while I in turn balanced on the cot-bed. "Ah-h!" she sighed blissfully as she snuggled down at last, "*now* I can sleep!"

"What else have you done all day?"

Her dark head poked over the side of her couch. "Most Honourable Bigland, I have written two letters, had chow, and eaten five mangoes and a half a pound of *lichees*."

My reply was a grunt, for I had lost no time in throwing off my few garments and scrambling between my sodden Jaeger blankets. What did a little damp matter when you had a *bed*?

Dreams were broken by the most extraordinary sounds and as I opened my eyes I saw, to my horror, a swaying figure apparently suspended from the ceiling above my head. "It is all right, Missie," gasped this apparition who proved to be the cook-boy, "I am just fixing a hook on which to hang your mosquito-net."

I did not even bother to ask the poor man what support he had for his acrobatic position. For the first time I was sleeping in China—nothing else counted.

Chapter Four

BACKGROUND TO WAR

I

THE morning light came slowly to Mangshih as though reluctant to reveal the loathsomeness of its foetid alleys. Soldiers and drivers climbed down from the open trucks where they had lain the night long, wrung the wet from their garments and formed up in queues outside the shops from which the shutters were being removed; but they might have saved themselves the trouble for the baker had no bread, the butcher no meat, the grocer no rice, and the only man doing any trade was the salt-merchant, before whose window the Shans fought for possession of the grey lumps of rock. Up and down the main street khaki-clad figures from the camps marched wearily, their puttees caked with yellow mud, and behind them crawled the water-coolies, bent double under their yokes. Opposite the guest-house an aged shopkeeper arranged his poor stock. He was a leper and one shuddered to watch his long discoloured hands touching the fruits and vegetables brought in by the hillmen. Beside him stood an ancient beggar leaning on his staff, his only possessions a dirty metal bowl and a pair of chopsticks. He had slept beside the Highway and the day long he would wander through the town, a sightless, sore-infested figure whose thin lips moved in a ceaseless gabble for alms.

Another shop door opened and something hurtled through it to land with a thud on the muddy ground. Once it had been a human being; now in death the limbs were crooked in grotesque attitudes. Nobody paid the least attention to it except the hordes of pigs, who snuffled and tore at the rags which covered it, and only a few steps away a woman sat placidly feeding her baby.

Joe came and stood beside me on the balcony. "His is the second death in that house within twelve hours. They refuse to

keep a corpse indoors so he will lie there until someone arrives to coffin him."

The rain began again. It fell like a thick drop-curtain, blotting out sight of everything save the lines of trucks directly beneath us. The manager lolled on the rail at my elbow. "Trucks, trucks, trucks. There is nothing in my life except trucks!"

I couldn't bear balcony view any longer. Borrowing a coolie hat I set forth for a walk, speeded on my way by the delightful Mr. Tsing, who spoke excellent French and bade me avoid the mud, useless advice since mud in Mangshih was omnipresent. I left poor Joe standing on a heap of stones in the deplorable courtyard haranguing a group of apathetic coolies who leaned on spades and regarded him out of lack-lustre eyes.

"Terrible they are," he groaned. "I arrived expecting to see this yard cleared and under Indian corn—and look at it! For three whole months we have been trying to get workmen. They come for a day, draw their pay, go the round of the local markets and do not reappear until they need more money. It is the same with the wash-girls, work a day and rest a week."

Basely I sidled past the still busy carpenters and slopped down the street, a trail of squealing piglets at my heels. I bought tins of cigarettes in a small shop which held, besides an assortment of tobaccos, six oxen chained to posts in the wall and I provided a free entertainment for the populace who stood stock still and gaped as I passed. Presently my porcine followers were scattered by the Shans who walked eagerly in my wake, shouting to their friends heaven knew what remarks about the foreign devil in their midst. Embarrassed, I sought sanctuary in the Yunnan-Burma depot and there found Ching and a mechanic bending above the engine of our bus. The mechanic had a little English: "No good," he said sombrely, and pointed to the carburettor.

My heart sank. We were supposed to leave for Lungling after lunch and the mere thought of an added hour in Mangshih made me depressed. He scratched his head with a spanner and went on, "Three day, four day maybe. Convoy not here, tools not here, nothing here. Bad place."

I said slowly, "Do you mean we cannot leave to-day?"

He held his sides and roared with laughter. "Never leave Mangshih!"

The awful conviction stole over me that he was right. I turned away, climbed a fence and stumbled across a field. I had to get away from leprosy and goitre, from the yellow mud and the smell of death which girdled this fearful town, from the queer humped shapes of guns under wet shining tarpaulins. Suddenly I remembered the sick man still jolting on the road from Che'fann and felt physically ill myself. His little wife had been so sure Mangshih would cure him!

Ahead of me was a road which sprang out of nowhere and, miracle of miracles, had a clean hard surface. Walking along it I reached a bridge hung with gorgeous flowering creeper and stepped across it into paradise. Entranced, I gazed at one of the loveliest gardens I had ever seen. Great bushes of scented lilies fringed a curving pathway, red, purple and golden dahlias blazed against the dark green of magnolia trees, a hundred kinds of rose nodded gently under the weight of the rain drops. Lowering skies could not mar the beauty of that garden. Like a person in a dream I wandered through it, fingering strange leaves and flowers, pausing by tiny lakes where delicate lotus buds floated, lingering open-mouthed by a spreading tropic tree laden with vivid blue blossom. The wonders of the place were endless and so absorbed was I that I nearly tripped over a kneeling gardener, and, forgetting he was Chinese, said, "I beg your pardon."

He looked at me, gave a shrill cackle of fear and fled down a path leaving me rather agitatedly realizing that I was a trespasser, and before I could decide whether to follow him or sneak back to the road a small yet majestic figure appeared—the Sawbwa of Mangshih.

In Lashio he had looked Royal; here, against a background of rioting dahlias, he looked a god.

His manners were unimpeachable. He bowed deeply: "Ah, the English lady honours me?"

My lying mumble replied I had been on my way to pay my respects but had lost myself in the glory of his domain.

"You must visit my palace."

He marched in front; I trailed meekly behind, marvelling anew at the grace of this little man with the golden face, but as we rounded a corner in the path I caught my breath for facing us was a vast and hideous building covered in white stucco

that bore an uncanny resemblance to any suburban English cinema.

"My palace."

We passed through an enormous bare hall round which were ranged large and priceless vases, and instinctively I glanced down at my muddy, Shan-shod feet. But my host led on and I crept after him into a long, high-ceilinged room which immediately induced in me the ghastly feeling of claustrophobia, for it was crowded with tapestries, pictures, *objets d'art*, furniture and multitudes of little yellow children, who giggled and jumped and played tig.

Nowhere in my varied travels had I met with such an odd admixture of cultures. Ming bowls jostled Siamese Buddhas, exquisite vessels of *Sang de Boeuf* partnered Dresden Sheperdesses, Louis Quinze chairs leaned drunkenly against bureaux of Chipendale design, a Sheraton table without a fourth leg supported four Burmese gongs and among, above and around these treasures flaunted the least lovable of Landseer's stags, odd prints of "The Maiden's Prayer" and "September Morn", the lesser brassware of Birmingham City and a whole host of cuckoo clocks, Toby jugs, fumed oak settles and mugs bearing the legend "A Present from Brighton".

Maybe it was the juxtaposition of China and Brighton which gave me the willies, maybe it was the legless Sheraton table; but certainly it was not the sight of the little yellow children, for they were gay, charming creatures. I did not know if they belonged to the Sawbwa and dared not inquire, for there seemed no affinity between that austere personage and the babies who romped among his riches. Ignoring them he strode on into another yet larger room as simple as the first one had been crowded, for it possessed scarcely any furniture and on plain shelves running round the walls were set magnificent examples of ceramic art. Reverently he took piece after piece of china into his hands, explaining the history of each, and as I watched his slim gold fingers caressing the texture of the ware I thought that if the Sawbwa worshipped anything it was the inanimate beauty of vase or bowl.

He sighed as he replaced an off-white plate covered with finest tracery. "And now we will visit my tung oil plantation."

Out we walked into the rain again. Valuable the plantation

may have been but to me it appeared an untidy collection of dull, stunted bushes growing in a wilderness of rank grass and as soon as I could I murmured that it was time I returned to the guest-house.

"The parting guest must have refreshment," said the Sawbwa, so we went back to the hall and a servant brought a heavy silver tray laden with frail and perfect little bowls. Lifting one I bowed to my host and drank—the contents were neat whisky.

He accompanied me to the door, where a major-domo waited to escort me to the bridge. "Good-bye, I trust you are enjoying your stay in Mangshih."

Again I walked through the heavenly garden and at the bridge the major-domo pointed to a lane on the left, clasped one hand over the other and bowed before scuttering back the way he had come. I stood on the firm road which stopped abruptly at the boundary of the Sawbwa's estate and stared down the lane.

On either side of it were derelict houses, their shutters flapping from broken hinges, and bordering a river of mud were two rows of market stalls piled high with pineapples, mangoes, plantains, cabbages and Indian corn, for it was bazaar day in Mangshih and the hill-folk had come long distances with their produce. Every few minutes a truck thundered up the muddy river, scattering the crowds to right and left so that they cannoned into the stalls and the fruit and vegetables rolled to the ground, but nobody seemed to mind and within a second the business of the market went on once more.

The vegetables were muddy, the fruit bruised and plastered with mud. By dint of much holding up of fingers I gathered the pineapples were ten cents apiece, but when I proffered a dollar bill it was waved aside and the old woman behind the stall shrieked indignantly until Joe, carrying a huge basket and followed by a protesting Miss Wei, splashed towards me. "National Currency not accepted in Mangshih," he explained and dangled a long string of cash. "There are both silver and nickel coins here."

We bought a dozen pineapples and moved on in search of jade and silverware, but all we could find were some little enamelled horrors clearly imported from the West. I purchased a bolster-shaped fruit with a prickly skin which eventually proved to be the sickliest sort of paw-paw and Miss Wei invested in a dollar's worth of plantains (there were about sixty on the stem and the

English equivalent in money was sevenpence); then I said, "But why the insistence on coinage here?"

"Because the Sawbwa is calling in all valuable metals. Now come and visit the doctor."

We ploughed through a mile and a half of mud and forded two rivers before we found his surgery in an ancient house past which a mill-race thundered. Sitting on a parapet we washed our feet, legs and shoes in the rushing water, but even so we were hardly in a fit state for the paying of calls since each time we moved our clothes dripped.

A moment later we were being greeted by Dr. Ling, his two colleagues and a sweet, laughing little nurse, and I was being shown over the first really clean house I had seen in China. A London graduate, Dr. Ling had performed miracles since the Government had sent him to Mangshih three months previously to try to cure the terrible amount of disease among the troops, the drivers and the Highway officials and workers. Local boys were unobtainable, so he and his staff had mended roofs, white-washed walls, built partitions, scoured floors and turned a rotting house into a restful sanctuary. Proudly he displayed his dispensary where the rough boards were white as snow and the bottles shone in orderly rows on their shelves and the scent of iodoform hung heavy on the air. I gazed at the instruments being sterilized in a crude trough above a primitive lamp, inspected the slides under the microscope and stood in awe before the operating-table—which was entirely home-made. "Have you enough quinine?" he asked, and gave me a bottle-full before leading me out to the centre courtyard where oleanders bloomed gaily in green tubs. The others had gone upstairs to dissect pineapples, so we lit cigarettes and leaned against the slender pillars talking of his work.

"The climate is atrocious," he told me gravely, "but the real trouble lies with the Shans themselves. They are a filthy and deplorable people and there are about 40,000 of them in the town alone, living under impossible conditions and flatly refusing our aid. Constant inter-marriage has made them practically a race of crétins. The Central Government feared the troops were spreading venereal disease: on the contrary, it is the Shans who infect the troops and one of my most difficult tasks is to find the pregnant women and treat them so that their children at least

may be born sound. We run clinics; nobody comes to them. We issue disinfectants and preventatives for this and that; they throw them to the pigs or trample them in the mud."

I asked him about the poison gases supposed to rise from the ground, and he shook his head with a smile.

"The usual superstition. There is no medical or scientific evidence of such gases. These towns are all built in cups between the mountains, hence what is known as the "fever-belt" for in these hollows congregate all the mosquitoes. Mind you, the dirtiness of the Shans makes disease far more rampant—have you seen the pigs, for example? They live mostly on human excreta flung out of the houses and if you look closely at their black snouts you will see they are thick with flies."

I shuddered. Suddenly I had remembered the fairy garden, the treasure-filled palace of the Sawbwa, the marvellous off-white plate he had handled so reverently. Sale of that plate alone might have provided enough money for countless improvements in Mangshih. "Can't the Sawbwa do anything about the pigs?"

"We asked him if he would issue an edict forcing his people to keep them under control, but he has ignored our request. He is not so interested in the welfare of China as we are; he cares only for his proud ancestry, his power. Many of our Mandarins are like that and their rule is still strong."

I had accepted the Sawbwa's hospitality and drunk his whisky, but I had a passionate desire to march back across his delectable bridge and rave at him until I had no breath left. Dr. Ling spoke serenely, "We are not faint-hearted, we believe in a great future for our peoples and know it will come true."

Meantime he and his colleagues laboured as I have seen few men labour, fighting a grim eternal battle with death.

II

On the way home we passed three men tossing in delirium on the road-side, groups of children positively encrusted with weeping eczema, a beggar with his toes dropping off through gangrene and a woman giving birth to a baby under a hedge. I reached the balcony just in time to see another corpse being flung out of the house opposite—the body of the early morning was still there and the pigs were very busy.

“Ha!” said Mr. Tsing, “you will have plenty time in which to explore Mangshih because the rest of your convoy has not yet arrived and it will take some days to clear a fresh landslide between here and Lungling. Never mind, we are having better chow to-day—one of the wash-girls is cooking it, wait until you taste our sweet-sour pork!”

I turned away. My lunch consisted of rice, soup and beans.

Afterwards I chatted to Mr. Tsing while the entire population massed in the street below and stared up at us, their mouths wide open. Behind us Miss Wei slept on her teased cotton-yarn, the manager and the accountant sprawled face downwards on their truckle beds, and the Cantonese cook muttered and tossed on the floor of his room. Mindful of advice given me by Dr. Ling I called the boy and instructed him to bring a kerosene tin of boiling water, a large bucket and my water filter. We narrowly escaped scalding but finally had the bucket sterilized and filled with boiled water into which we popped the filter; then we turned our attention to the cook.

He couldn't move his limbs at all, but his cracked lips kept up a ceaseless chant to Mr. Tsing about how he wished to go back to his home. Presently one of Dr. Ling's colleagues arrived, a huge young man in gum-boots, and gave him an injection. “He may live; he may not. He has malignant malaria and should have been attended to earlier. It is a bad disease; if one is not injected one is delirious in six hours and paralyzed in twelve. I will call again to-night and give him a hypodermic into the muscles instead of the blood stream.”

We bathed the man's face and arms and adjourned to the balcony just in time to see the Filipino's convoy join the lines of stationary trucks. My friends the head driver and the Punjaubi

waved cheerily and shouted up to me that they had been delayed by breakdowns, that they wanted to push on to Lungling that night, and that none of their men had any food. I routed out tins of sausages and sardines while Mr. Tsing shrieked excitedly in French that it was impossible for them to proceed.

"Tell him to go to hell, Madam," shouted the Filipino as I translated the gist of his speech.

"But you can't go on; the landslide is too bad."

"I'm going if I have to take a rope in my teeth and drag the perishing trucks over the blasted mountains!"

I changed the subject. "Your can of petrol is waiting for you at the depot."

"Hell, yes, Madam, and it's B.O.C. after all."

Hastily I invited him up for a dish of tea and he and Mr. Tsing established friendship by indulging in a spitting competition. Feeling that I could leave them without qualm I roused the dormouse and suggested we should wash ourselves and our garments in Mangshih river that evening after dark; then I went in search of Joe who was still arguing with the lazy Shans. "In another month," he told me, "we shall have a dining-room downstairs, seven more bedrooms and a proper lavatory. When you journey back along the Highway you will see them."

I replied nastily that doubtless we should still be in Mangshih in a month's time and immediately he was up in arms. It was really a lovely place in the dry weather, and I shouldn't listen to the Doctor's tales, and I didn't seem to have any respect for the Sawbwa.

I said flatly, "I don't believe there is any such place as Yunnanfu," and the vials of his wrath opened afresh. Usually the least argumentative of beings I always saw red when Joe started haranguing me and now we entered upon a fierce argument which lasted us until dusk, and greatly intrigued the Filipino. "Say," he nudged me, "you'll turn into a Chink yourself if you don't watch out."

Very nearly his words came true before I reached Kunming.

It was time for our washing expedition. Solemnly we sallied forth through the rain, Joe in front with the lantern, Miss Wei and I behind carrying our bundles of washing. It was barely dark when we reached the river, so we squatted on the stones beside Ching and several other drivers who were washing their

shirts and pounded away at our clothes. We were popular because of our lantern, but when the night came down blackly the others departed and we instructed Joe to await us on the bridge while we bathed.

My fondest memory of Mangshih is of holding up a large bath-towel while Miss Wei splashed shoulder-deep, but when my turn to bathe came the soap slipped from my hand and as I dived to retrieve it horrible clammy bands wreathed themselves about my neck. I came up gasping, "Snakes!"

They were. We held the lantern close above the water and found it infested with them. Very probably they were harmless but we were through with Mangshih river even though it still held my precious soap. Like a couple of ninnies we yelled for Joe as we wriggled into our wet garments and soon he minced across the stones and announced with dignity that he would remain dirty while in Mangshih.

III

It was that night I began to feel ill. I awakened shivering as though with ague, but in two minutes a burning heat swept my body. Fiercely I argued with myself. Probably I had caught a slight chill from sleeping in wet blankets, or perhaps the sight of so much death and decay had unnerved me. I was never really ill, indeed, several times in my life I had tried to stage a good, serious illness and failed miserably. A couple of quinine tablets would do the trick and send me to sleep again, but the precious water filter was over by the door. I swung my legs out of bed and they gave under me as though made of cotton-wool. Miss Wei slept peacefully above my head, the crickets chirruped in the roof. Joe was far away at the other end of the balcony. I gave up the quinine idea and tried to crawl back into bed. It took me half an hour. Through the endless early morning hours I lay sweating, panting, shivering. What was it the Doctor had said? ". . . *delirious in six hours and paralyzed in twelve.*"

My next memory was of Dr. Ling's face bending above me. I wanted to ask him if the hypodermic had been sterilized and wondered if I had lock-jaw because I couldn't open my mouth.





He came again, I believe, and gave me a second injection, but I am glad I cannot remember much of that day for I have an idea it was pure hell. But malignant malaria, if properly treated, is short and sharp and by the following morning I was as weak as a kitten but had a normal temperature.

Joe was marvellously kind to me, bringing me bowls of green Yunnan tea, and slices of juicy pineapple (I craved for water but that was forbidden), but as usual we argued absurdly.

He said: "It is dreadful for our honoured guest to catch illness from the poison gases."

"There aren't any poison gases."

"Sh-h, I have heard of them since I was a small child with a pigtail."

"The Chinese don't wear pigtails nowadays."

"You forget I am thirty-four. When I was little they still wore them. But listen, you will have to stay here many weeks to recover your strength."

"No, I will die if I stay in Mangshih. If you and Ching have to carry me to the bus I am going on when you go."

"Your death," he said dramatically, "will be at my door. Be sensible, please. Why not return to Lashio with the Roosevelt Expedition? Conditions are too bad for them and they are turning back."

I thought of trailing ignominiously back to Rangoon to a chorus of "I told you so's" and my determination hardened. "I'm going on with you, I tell you."

"Listen again," soothed Joe. "The Sawbwa regrets to hear of your sickness and offers you the loan of one of his Chevrolet cars as far as Lashio."

That finished it. I was going to reach Kunming if I had to buy a coffin for eight bucks.

Our biggest argument, however, was over the rats. There were mysterious rustlings in my room from behind the cuspidors but I paid small heed until the third night of my illness when something suddenly clutched the back of my head, and I flashed on the torch to find three enormous rodents decorating my pillow. In the morning I tackled Joe.

"Will you please tell the boy to put my bed on the balcony?"

He looked scandalized. "I never heard of such an idea! If you are moved you will die."

"I'd rather die of fever than suffer rats nibbling my back hair. Go and fetch the boy."

Instead he fetched Mr. Tsing who asked exactly *why* I wanted to die on the balcony?

"*Pour encourager les autres*," and we giggled weakly while Joe stumped to and fro in a fine state.

Poor harassed Joe. I honestly believe he would have regarded himself as a murderer had anything happened to me, but his notions of curing the sick were not mine. "I am terrified of rats," I told him passionately.

"But no! They are harmless, nice little animals."

"They are horrible and they carry all manner of diseases. If you leave me in that room doubtless I shall catch some other complaint."

Terrified, he rushed for the boy and installed me on the balcony. The boy said cheerfully, "Three more dead across the street, Missie."

"And not coffined yet," added Joe with relish.

Mr. Tsing revived me by sitting beside me and announcing he would now tell me some funny stories. "Once upon a time there was a Chinese doctor who made wonderful cures among the sick, but with one patient he made a wrong diagnosis and this man suffered many pains before he at length recovered. He was so angry that he enticed the doctor out for a walk and when they reached the banks of a wide deep river he said: 'As a punishment for your bad medicine I am going to drown you,' and he pushed the doctor into the water and ran away. But somehow the doctor struggled ashore, reached home and went to bed in warm blankets. His little boy came in and said, 'Papa, papa, when I grow up I want to be a doctor like you. How do I learn how to cure sick people?' And the doctor answered, 'First of all, my son, you must learn to swim.'

"There is another story too, about a woman who had her lover in the house while her husband drove his pigs to market. They did not expect him back until the following day but late that night they heard his footsteps approaching so the wife hid the lover in the paddy-bin. She looked very flustered when her husband came in but said there was nothing wrong, so his suspicions were lulled until he noticed that she sat with her chair drawn up in front of the bin. 'What is it in the paddy-bin that you are

guarding?' he asked; and the lover's voice answered from the bin, 'Nothing!'

I drowsed. The stories rattled on, growing steadily more and more unrepeatable. Mr. Tsing carved me a piece of pineapple with his penknife, every man, woman and child in Mangshih gazed up at me, even the pigs stampeded to get a better view, and all the time the sick cook moaned and the manager and the accountant drooped from bed to table and table to bed. The Filipino brought me a tin of cigarettes I could not smoke and the Punjaubi appeared with a broad grin and a plantain, and the trucks were massed ever closer in the street below, until I felt strangely akin to the manager: "*Trucks, trucks, trucks. There is nothing in my life except trucks.*"

Night came; the others went to bed, but through the mosquito netting rigged up by the faithful boy I watched the bobbing lanterns and flaring torches light up the street scene. An endless stream of soldiers weaved its way in and out between the trucks and the air vibrated with shrill speech, snatches of song, outbursts of swearing when someone who had drunk too much of the fiery rice spirit stumbled over a pig. The rain hissed steadily from a black sky, the drivers hoisted themselves into their cabs, spread a variety of rags across their bodies and prepared for another sleepless night, Sikhs, Punjaubis, Bengalis, Madrassis and Ghurkas wandered up and down demanding food they had no hope of buying. Wailing through the darkness came the lament of the Manchurians, "*My home has gone . . .*" and as I listened to the echoing cadences the full tragedy of China's war smote me.

Because of that war men from all over the vast land had to stay beside the goitrous diseased Shans, had to toil with guns and shells and high explosives, had to labour with boulders and shifting sandstone amid everlasting rain until the fever shrivelled their very bones and they lay mute and waited for death. Because of that war the Highway I had so longed to travel, the glorious vision of Sun Yat Sen, had been transformed into a road through hell along which skeletons rattled performing a ghastly dance of the Trolls.

IV

In reality I spent three days on that balcony; they seemed like three years. Around me the inhabitants of the guest-house ate, worked, wrote letters, talked, washed, slept and spat; below me the trucks still stood in the rain. I did not care, for the smell of death was in my nostrils and I had ceased to believe I should ever escape from Mangshih. I should not be permitted to join the ever growing company of the dead—that would be too easy a punishment; I should linger on like the leprous shopkeeper opposite, condemned to watch those revolting, damnable pigs year after weary year. With Mr. Tsing I engaged in fantastic plans for tourist traffic on a grand scale when war should be over; with Joe I discussed Confucianism, the defence of Hong Kong, the international situation in Europe, and China's war; with Miss Wei I spoke of education, religion and child welfare; with Dr. Ling I talked of air-travel, the latest discoveries for cancer-cure and the restaurants of London, but so soon as these kindly souls departed I relapsed into melancholy for everything we mentioned belonged to a far world I should never return to because Mangshih held me too tenaciously to her withered breast.

It took the Filipino's rebellion to arouse me. "I don't care if the whole bloody road's caved in, I'm leaving in the morning! Look at my men, every one of them sick, and all they can buy to eat is a handful of that damned rice. I tell you, madam, it ain't human to ask the fellows to hang on in this graveyard. Old John over there," he nodded his head towards Mr. Tsing, "can yell his block off—I'm taking the road in the morning."

The thought of being left without him and the Punjaubi could not be borne. "Take me with you."

He regarded me pityingly. "You're a darned sight too sick, madam, and I'm late on schedule as it is—we were supposed to be in Pao Shan nearly a week ago. See here, pull a fast one on Old John and tell him you'll go crackers if he don't shift you."

Surprisingly, there was no need for any machiavellian wiles on my part because that evening the beaming Mr. Liu and his small daughter turned up. The convoy had at last arrived—at least the major portion of it had done so; the landslide near

Lungling had been repaired; we should start at dawn on the morrow. "Unless, of course, it rains in the night," added Mr. Tsing severely. Since it had never ceased raining during our stay in Mangshih, we ignored this absurd remark and fell to discussing what food we should take.

"Lungling is only thirty-six kilometres," said Joe airily.

We waved this distance aside as a mere bagatelle and decided that a few mealies and a pineapple or two would be sufficient for our modest needs. Summoning the boy Miss Wei instructed him in the art of boiling Indian corn, while Joe rushed off with a string bag to do the shopping and I felt suddenly so fit that I staggered out of bed and began to pack.

We ate well that evening, for under a promise that he should have a month's leave the accountant developed a positive genius for cookery, achieving several tasty dishes of fried chicken, white cabbage and bamboo shoots. Even the rats no longer worried me and I had the boy shift my bed indoors. "Have a nice long sleep," admonished Joe as he blew out our lamp at ten o'clock, but two hours later we were awakened by a fearful commotion—Director An, head of the Highway, together with several high officials of the Central Government who were on a tour of inspection, had arrived from Lungling minus beds, food or dishes, and nearly all the necessary stores were in our bedroom.

Two perspiring boys struggled with dusty plates, bowls and cuspidors; the new bundle of chopsticks was discovered under my bed; the dust descended upon me in clouds as they grovelled in the corners for pillows and mattresses. But the crowning disaster came when they announced they required all the teazled cotton-yarn to stuff the mattresses, for there was Miss Wei sound asleep on her mountainous couch! I do not know how she did not waken, for one boy pulled the fluffy stuff from one end, and the second from the other, until finally her small body landed with a thud on to the hard wooden bed, but she merely grunted slightly and turned on her side although her look of bewilderment in the morning was ludicrous.

We were packed and ready by six, and Ching had the bus parked outside the guest-house, but Mr. Tsing appeared at breakfast in lugubrious mood. "There is a bad breakdown three kilometres ahead. A returning truck collided with one which left here last night and the road is completely blocked."

We did not speak; we just stared at each other wretchedly. We pushed away our bowls of liquid rice and wandered dejectedly along the balcony. "And it's a fine morning," said Joe in a hollow voice. Leaning over the rail, I studied him and Miss Wei. My dose of fever was behind me; unless I was greatly mistaken, theirs lay ahead, for Joe's face was drawn and the dormouse shivered uncontrollably as she stood beside me. The leper set his stock in order, the ancient beggar scratched his stick-like legs, the cattle that had spent the night indoors trooped into the street, the steam rising from their hides, the pigs rooted in the filth.

In the hot, sudden sunshine Mangshih leered at us.

Miss Wei climbed on to her wooden couch. As our beds were packed Joe and I invaded the manager's room and lay down, but the accountant's mattress felt as though it was stuffed with bricks and, despite the tropic heat, I felt desperately cold, and Joe kept up a monologue of woe. Fate had written we should never reach Lungling. So soon as the damaged trucks were cleared away there would be another collision, another landslide. Fever was upon him and in six hours he would be delirious. . . .

Somehow we slept, but in my dreams Mangshih took on the guise of a sinister, monstrous pig which chivvied me through a boundless sea of yellow mud.

The boy waked us with tea and we trailed back to the balcony rail. Down the street thundered a truck, the back of which contained two battered bodies—the drivers who had collided the previous night. I said fretfully, "They might at least have the decency to cover them up."

"Why? What is a body? It means nothing."

That was the trouble. Nothing had any meaning any longer.

Mr. Liu clambered out of the truck cab and waved frantically. "All right!" he shouted, "you may start at one o'clock."

Joe and I clasped each other round the waist and waltzed the length of the balcony until he stopped abruptly and said, "This will not do. The Generalissimo does not approve of dancing in time of war."

Mr. Tsing poked an anxious head out of his room. "Careful," he remarked reprovingly, "Director An and the members of the Central Government are inspecting the town this morning."

I wondered grimly what their reactions would be to the pigs, and went off to wake the dormouse.

Our lunch was tremendously gay, and further enlivened by the arrival of Dr. Ling and the laughing little nurse to bid us farewell. "When you reach Pao Shan," said the latter, "please call upon my husband at the South-Western Transportation offices and give him news of me. We were only married four weeks ago and such a business it was too, for I am a Christian and he an atheist. I journeyed to Pao Shan by mule and only had twenty-four hours in the city when I reached there. It is so funny to look back upon, but at the time it was most agitating because neither of the missionaries there would marry us and I had to run from the North Gate to the South Gate all through a pouring wet morning trying to persuade one or other of them to perform the ceremony. In the end I had to promise to convert my husband, and then the North Gate missionary agreed to marry us. See, he gave me this fine paper," and from the folds of her robe she fished out an imposing sheet of parchment.

"And is your husband now a Christian?" I inquired.

The whole company rocked with laughter. "Ah, no," said the little nurse, "he will never have any interest in Christianity, but as I am a convert I had to be married at the mission-house, else I should have felt guilty of committing a sin. Besides," she added cheerfully, "it pleased the missionary."

Miss Wei looked up anxiously. "If you joke like that you will perhaps give Bigland a wrong idea of our attitude towards religion."

Hurriedly I changed the subject. "And did you return here by mule?"

"No, no. My husband arranged a lift for me in a truck as far as Lungling, but from there the Highway was impassable owing to the rains, so I walked over the mountains. It only took me two and a half days and I had the Wellington boots."

I stared at the dainty creature, at her silver and green-flowered robe, at her tiny bare feet with their henna'd toe-nails. She didn't look capable of walking a mile along an English road!

"You see," she rattled on, "it was highly important I got back because Dr. Ling and the others were desperately busy and needed my help. But now we must go—do not forget m

messages to my husband, and when you travel again this way come and stay with us."

I watched her as she slipped on her shoes and clattered down the ladder, her robe held tightly about slim honey-coloured legs to avoid the dust. "It is sad for her being separated from her husband," I said to Mr. Tsing.

He and Joe glanced towards me in puzzled fashion. "They each have important work," replied the former simply, "and they will see each other again after the war."

Suddenly I felt thoroughly ashamed of myself. A bare week of Mangshih had driven me to bitter complaint; the little nurse, so in love with her new husband, could contemplate with a smile an enforced sojourn of one, two or maybe five years in this town of death. Back in Rangoon Mr. Chen and the Chinese Foreign Minister, Mr. T. K. Tseng, had explained to me the attitude of China to the Japanese war, but that explanation had scarcely registered in my mind. How could it, when I had no personal knowledge of China? But now that I had seen the background to the war, stayed ever so briefly in Mangshih, I realized dimly the vast tenacity of purpose animating the Chinese people.

"Look at the rain," said somebody, and I forgot the nurse as fear clutched me. Surely Mr. Tsing would not stop us at the last moment? I caught Joe's eye and began to talk very quickly about a European tour our friend wished to make in the future.

Ching carried the baggage down and we helter-skeltered after him, shaking the Mangshih mud from our shoes as we climbed into the bus. Mr. Tsing presented me with four pine-apples and kissed my hand, the manager and the accountant waved drooping paws, the boys beamed. Just as the engine thrummed into life a dejected procession came into view—the members of the Central Government returning from their tour of Mangshih. We did not greet them; we sat well forward on our hard seats, praying passionately that the bus wheels would not stick in the deep ruts. They whirled uselessly once, twice, then crawled forward and Ching drove steadily towards the grey wall of mist which hid the mountains. A violent squeal told us we had run over a pig; Joe and I smiled triumphantly at each other.

V

The gradients on the Highway between Che'fann and Mangshih had seemed incredible; on the Lungling section they had clearly been conceived by an angry god. Visibility was so poor that all we could see ahead was a perpendicular patch of red mud which we had to shoot up or down as the case might be, and it was easy to realize now how the trucks had collided on the previous day, for if Ching had not been a superb driver we must inevitably have slid to perdition and not all his skill could prevent the bus from lurching sickeningly on the very lip of a precipice each time we rounded a corner.

"If we could only see," I groaned to Joe; but when we surged upwards through the clouds into a world of glittering mountain peaks I regretted my words momentarily, for looping round and round the summits like a streamer of scarlet paper was the Highway we had to travel, and it seemed a sheer impossibility for our bus to make the journey. Dizzy, clinging for dear life to the window-frame, I shut my eyes very tightly.

"Nice hairpin bends," said Joe placidly.

"Chinese version," I muttered, for these close-shaped Z's bore no resemblance to certain double corners spoken of with awe on European roads.

Miss Wei's voice came consolingly from beside me. "Never mind, Bigland, we have left Mangshih."

It was remarkable what an amount of good that sentence did me. Sitting upright with a jerk I gazed about me and realized we were driving through a land of færy. Below us stretched a pearly carpet of cloud, around us the mountain slopes flashed all colours of the rainbow in the bright sunlight, above us towered snow-stippled peaks against a turquoise sky. Watching such beauty I began to appreciate the philosophy of the Chinese people. From the beginning of time they had lived in a country of sharp contrasts, horror unmentionable on one side of them, all glory on the other, and because they had walked always between these two extremes they had gained a mental balance not vouchsafed to any other race. Seven lifetimes in China would not have enabled me to achieve such balance or even understand it fully; but because I had experienced the misery of Mangshih and then,

before wretchedness had entirely engulfed me, been shown the miracle of the Highway scene, I could as it were put out my hand and touch the fringe of Chinese philosophy's robe.

That knowledge was extraordinarily comforting. It upheld me throughout my stay in China although perhaps its most severe test came before we reached Lungling, for we took three days to cover the thirty-six kilometres spoken of so lightly by Joe and only at rare intervals did we glimpse the wonder of the mountain-tops.

Our progress was, indeed, a series of mishaps intensified by practically continuous rain, yet I do not think we ceased joking for more than a few minutes together. Had our convoy been manned by Europeans maybe they would all have committed suicide on the first afternoon; but it was manned by forty-eight Chinese with myself tacked on as a bit of extra load—and perforce I accepted the Chinese attitude towards misfortune.

Our particular bus did everything a bus could do. Fountains of boiling water gushed protestingly from its radiator at remarkably short intervals, the carburettor supposedly attended to in Mangshih went wrong more times than I could count, and amongst other trivia the steering developed a list to the right which resulted in the front wheels being continually bogged in deep mud, while, with the sublime disregard for other people's troubles characteristic of the Chinese, the remainder of the convoy honked their horns behind us until tired, then thundered past to miss Ching or Joe by a hairbreadth.

Not that we minded; we were far too busy to care about bad road manners. Neither Joe nor myself possessed the slightest mechanical knowledge, but we argued frantically over each minor breakdown and persisted in giving poor Ching a great deal of erroneous advice. "Although why you bother when he does not understand a word you say," remarked Joe loftily, "I do not know."

But the next moment Ching would point at us and giggle at the odd sight we presented as we bobbed up and down with rage under our coolie hats, and peace would be restored until the next halt occurred.

It was late afternoon when we panted laboriously up a mountainside, teetered madly on the summit and slid perilously downhill in a series of skids which eventually left us with our

back wheels wedged firmly in the mire. The three of us did our best. We got smothered in mud as we pushed and tugged vainly, and then Ching had the brilliant notion I should sit in the driving-seat and press the accelerator pedal flat down while he and Joe shoved at the back. Now the driving of a Baby Austin along a straight tarmacked road induces in me a feeling of absolute terror, and as I watched his gesticulations doubtless my fear showed in my face, for Joe said in his most American voice, "So you can't take it, eh? Perhaps you'd rather walk back to Mangshih?"

Meekly I climbed into the driver's cab and obeyed instructions until two unrecognizable figures crawled on to the running-boards and implored me to desist. From heads to feet they were caked in mud, and as I dried them off with handfuls of coarse grass the dormouse opened an eye, struggled into a sitting position and informed us solemnly that she possessed a driving license.

We began to laugh. We laughed until our sides ached and the sun set blood-red behind the peaks we had just negotiated; then we renewed our attacks on the wheels to the accompaniment of strange war-cries from Ching. "Aa-Oh-Ee, Aa-Oh-Eel" The right rear wheel moved ever so slightly, Joe and I tugged at it with might and main, Ching leaped into the cab, clashed the gear-lever into second and shot off downhill, leaving us prostrate on the ground. As we picked ourselves up the mud filled our eyes, ears and nostrils, stuck thickly to our clothes, clogged each movement of our feet, but we ran as gallantly as a couple of pussies in seven-leagued boots down that fearful slope lest the bus whirled on to Lungling without us.

We need not have worried; it was our unlucky day. We caught up with the bus and the bus caught up with the convoy, but as we crawled down one side of a wooded gorge there sounded an ominous rumble ahead, and then, with a succession of mighty crashes, half the far hillside tumbled across the Highway and in the fading light we saw trees, boulders and great clods of red earth hurtling to the river which growled somewhere beneath us.

The convoy jolted to a standstill and out of the dusk skipped the corporal, his rifle pointing directly at our petrol tank. "F—the landslide," he announced gaily. "Twenty-three kilometres to Lungling. Three days, four days, no go."

The dormouse sat bolt upright and said austere, "Please do not swear, very bad manners."

But you couldn't down the corporal. He began to speak very quickly in Mandarin, thus rousing the dormouse to a spate of reply in noisy Cantonese, and I started to giggle all over again. "It's so comical," I gasped to Joe, "to argue about an English swear-word in a Yunnan gorge."

"I agree," he giggled back. "Let us leave them to it and go and inspect the damage."

Led by Ching we picked our way past the leading trucks to the landslide, where the drivers were busily heaving tree-trunks and stones off the road. It seemed a hopeless task because the tropic night dropped swiftly, the rain began again, and nobody owned either pick or shovel; yet the energy and cheerfulness of the Chinese were amazing. Soaked through, hungry and tired out as they were, they laboured heroically, chanting and laughing over their work. Squatting on a boulder, I stared at the macabre picture they made in the light of the flaring torches brandished by half a dozen men. Against a background of gigantic, twisted jungle trees some twenty figures stooped grotesquely, their muddied limbs gleaming scarlet above the duller, brick-red glow of rock and sand. Occasionally their arms would flash upwards bearing a long black trunk aloft, and the thud of its fall into the gorge echoed and re-echoed round the hillsides, while sometimes the sweat poured so profusely from a man's face that his features shone golden in the torch-light.

It must have been two or three hours later that Ching came up to Joe and murmured something. "Come along," said the latter briskly, "he says they can do no more to-night."

My limbs were cramped and I swayed as I rose to my feet. "D'you think," I answered stupidly, "that we really died in Mangshih after all and this is hell?"

He clucked his teeth reprovingly and took my arm. "We are very much alive. Think of the nice supper we shall eat?"

Nice supper! Stumbling behind him to the bus I thought wistfully of my generosity towards the Filipino and his convoy, for my stock of canned goods was now woefully short. "I think there's a tin of sausages left," I said.

Joe snorted. "We may stay here many days and must con-

serve our supplies. This evening we shall sup off mealies and pineapples."

Even that menu proved optimistic, because the Mangshih cook-boy's idea of treating mealies was to par-boil them and Joe's penknife had disappeared so we could not peel the pineapples. Tired of gnawing corn-bullets, I handed my cobs through the window to have them grasped by eager hands and groped for the water-filter, which was supposedly on the floor by my feet. Thanks to our antics earlier in the day it had upset. That was that. Hunched under my coolie hat I wondered morosely if I should turn cannibal before we left this ghastly gorge, but just then Joe gave a whoop of joy—he had found several of Mr. Liu's rolls hidden between the rifle-cases. "A little oily," he remarked, "but does that matter?"

"No," I mumbled with my mouth full. Ten days old and sodden as they were, those rolls tasted like ambrosia. Fortified by three of them I seized a pineapple, tore it in half and sucked the sweet juice.

A driver appeared out of the gloom with a petrol tin full of water which he had fetched from the river at risk of breaking his neck. To drink it unboiled meant disease if not death, and although some enterprising men had lit a fire by the roadside it merely sent faint flickers through the blackness as the wood smoked and hissed in the beating rain; but eagerly we rolled handkerchiefs into tight wads, sprinkled these with the water and dabbed our faces, necks and limbs with exclamations of delight.

Just then, however, our feeble headlights failed altogether. Ching tried to start the engine; the battery had gone. For an hour I stood ankle-deep in the muddy ditch holding the torch while he and two others fiddled with bits of mechanism, waiting to Joe the while that my nice clean legs were getting dirty again. At last Ching pointed to my Shan bag. I had no least idea what he wanted from it, but some weird instinct caused me to take out my nail-file, whereat he beamed. Using it as a screwdriver he managed, in some unaccountable fashion, to mend the self-starter! (Weeks later I presented him with that nail-file as a parting gift and he told me, through Miss Wei, that it was the most valuable tool he had ever possessed.)

Just as he finished his job the torch battery ran down, and as

the only other one I owned was wet through we clambered back into the bus and sat in stygian darkness until one of the drivers achieved dry brushwood from a deserted hut nearby and piled it on the fire so successfully that the flames leapt high, splitting the teeming rain into two grey curtains and throwing into bold relief the grinning faces of the Chinese, who crouched in a circle chanting that same marching song of the Generalissimo's guerrilla armies I had heard from Ching. The sound rose loud and high against the beat, beat of the rain, and listening to it I felt humbled. Who was I to complain about muddied legs? I had mealies, pineapples, Jaeger blankets, a pillow, cigarettes, matches. These men who sang so cheerfully had but a handful of greyish husky rice they could not cook. . . .

Ching touched my arm. He was naked to the waist and in one hand he dangled a sopping shirt which I wrung out of the window and then festooned around the rack above my head in the fond hope it might dry overnight. The dormouse had not stirred for a couple of hours and Joe, tired out, lay full length and asnoring on his narrow seat, mud plastered hands clasped on his chest, spectacles askew on his forehead. I envied these two because sleep seemed a far gentleness I could not reach, but Ching stepped across me, wriggled his long legs under the seat in front of us and lay back on my pillow. "Keenin," he said, so I took the quinine bottle from my bag and we solemnly swallowed two tablets apiece before he tucked my blanket about me and pulled me towards him until my head rested on his shoulder. Through my clammy garments stole the comforting warmth of his body. How foolish it had been, I thought drowsily, to imagine sleep was a long way off, when in reality it was so close.

VI

During her rare periods of wakefulness the dormouse had kept up her letter-writing. No sooner did she blink the mists of sleep from her eyes than she reached automatically for her fountain-pen and her pad of thin rice paper, and continue some apparently endless epistle to one friend or another until, overcome by such industry, she tucked her equipment neatly away and relapsed into slumber. It was a habit which irritated me,

really, I suppose, because I am an extremely bad correspondent, and when Ching and I uncoiled ourselves in the dawn and saw her busily engaged in her favourite occupation, I said with some asperity, "Whatever do you find to write about?"

Her extraordinarily sweet smile flashed out as she answered, "All the things over which my friends and I laughed at college. Most of them are scattered now, you know, and since they feel the homesickness I remind them of happy times."

"That's very pleasant of you, but what's the use? I mean, you can't post the letters?"

"Oh, yes, they will go by mule or buffalo caravan from Lungling back to Bhamo, and the journey does not take so long as you imagine. Three or four weeks perhaps when the rains are not too fierce."

Collecting my sponge-bag and towel I departed to climb the hillside in search of water, and as I crouched by a little spring laving my face and hands I pondered her words. The thought of sending a letter out of China on the back of one of those sleek grey water-buffalo which plodded so solemnly across the mountain tracks intrigued me, and what were three, four or six weeks in this fascinating, age-old land where time moved so slowly?

Thereafter, while the men worked on the landslide and during the frequent halts that beset the convoy, I scribbled as industriously as the dormouse, but I wrote about the present instead of the past, describing in detail for my elder boy exactly what had happened since leaving Lashio. I am glad now that I did so, for in retrospect the remainder of our journey to Lungling seems an appalling succession of hardships and horrors, whereas at the time I was comparatively unimpressed by such things, and the picture given in a rather scrambled diary-letter is so much more truthful than anything I could now write that I quote the passage dealing with the twenty-three kilometres which still separated us from Lungling.

"Joe and I have just had one of our lengthy arguments as to whether it is Tuesday or Wednesday, the end of June or the beginning of July—not that these minor points matter in the least for we are just two people out of about fifty living entirely out of time in a Yunnan gorge which isn't even shown on a large-scale map. Anyway, neither of us could prove date or day

because eventually we remembered Joe had stolen my only calendar for toilet-paper so we compromised by chalking WEDNESDAY—JULY 1 on the dashboard which pleased us both and amused Ching.

"This morning, using our communal umbrella as an alpenstock, I levered myself up the hillside to do the family washing at a spring I'd found. I had Ching's shirts, also my own and various oddments such as handkerchiefs and socks, but as my hands and arms were covered in mud as hard as red lacquer my efforts weren't too good despite a fearful waste of carbolic soap, so I gave up and, the rain having stopped, just stared at beauty. The gorge is immensely deep and wooded with queer twisted trees like those in the Jabberwock's tungle wood, but all around the branches wind the climbing orchids so that I looked down from near the hilltop on to a myriad stars of purple and gold, scarlet and white.

"Beside the spring there was a semi-circle of bushes with dark glossy leaves and incredibly lovely white flowers which felt like velvet when I stroked them, so I sat in the sun enjoying (and drying) myself and feeling gorgeously Olympic because far below me the drivers and a young army of coolies toiled to repair the landslide, but unfortunately they finished the job more quickly than seemed possible and all of a sudden I heard the sound of car engines which sent me slithering down to the road through some prickly undergrowth, scratching my legs to bits and tearing Ching's best shirt in the process.

"I wasn't awfully popular in the bus because they had had to wait for me and Joe (who I'm horribly sure is in for a bad go of fever) was very disagreeable because I hung the washing up to dry on the racks. He said it was like living in a travelling laundry and that the clothes smelt like death. It's funny that, all the Chinese honestly believe I carry an atmosphere of death about with me because I wash myself and garments so frequently; but for my part I can't forget memory of the dormouse squatting placidly on her bed in Mangshih removing bugs from the seams of her pants.

"*Same Afternoon.* Never eat liquid rice. It swells inside of you until you feel you'll burst, but after half an hour you get pangs of hunger at your vitals. As there wasn't any other food we suffered it for breakfast and lunch, and as a result Joe and



I quarrelled violently about landslides. He's a charming person but his faculty for exaggeration can seldom have been equaled: 'Three or four days the landslide will take to repair!' when it had taken little over twelve hours, and not content with that he moaned all morning about the next one we might meet, so I told him I didn't believe a word he said and sat in front with Ching.

"I wish you knew Ching. I admire Joe and Miss Wei, like them exceedingly; but Ching simply is China. He comes of coolie stock, neither of us can understand a word the other says, and our conversation is a series of nods, gesticulations and grunts, yet I've learnt far more from him than from the other two and I know that only he can help me understand this fascinating, maddening Chinese puzzle. I know more than that, realize he is showing me while we travel how his country absorbs every one who really comes into contact with it.

"That sounds high-hat, doesn't it? You'll giggle and remember Ma's strange enthusiasms for other people, other lands. But those were surface emotions and under and behind them I retained certain basic views on men and world affairs; *now the basic views are altering* and that is very odd indeed. It is a slow process, not painful yet uncomfortable—I feel sure a snake feels as I do when he sloughs his skin; and it is doing me much good because it is teaching me humility of mind which I shall not lose in a hurry. (When you are upholding the might of Empire in some Chinese station I shall probably offend you by fraternising with your household staff.)

"But that is by the way. At the moment I am bedraggled, rather hungry, definitely lousy, outwardly cross because the trucks ahead of us keep breaking down but inwardly content because the gorge has widened to a broad green valley carpeted with flowers, and the sun is shining, and in my lap I am nursing a chipped *Sang de Boeuf* vase which holds one yellow lily. This treasure belongs to Ching and each morning, however short of water we are, he fills it tenderly and keeps us waiting about twenty minutes while he searches for a fresh and lovely flower to put in it. The other forty-odd drivers do the same, and throughout nightmare days of wrestling in the mud with refractory engines you will see them turn occasionally to their beloved ceramic vase or pot and stroke the petals of the flower within it.

"Next Morning. I slept again on Ching's shoulder, most comforting. Joe wasn't so happy and couldn't even lap liquid rice for breakfast. I feel worried about him, for it is so easy to pass from life to death in this Yunnan fever-belt, but he is more cheerful since Ching scaled a tree and picked dozens of brilliant purple orchids which he has festooned among the washing on the racks! The rains began again last night, so this morning we are jolting along at funereal pace, and judging by the splutters and bangs we have quite a lot of water in our petrol. The dormouse still sleeps—how I envy that girl.

"Later. Our leading truck fell to pieces about eight o'clock more thoroughly than I believed a truck could fall. There were bits of it all over the road and the other drivers were so astonished they just stood around with their mouths wide open, but fortunately for us Ching learnt rare enterprise in Nanking and somehow wriggled our bus to the head of the convoy, where a figure who proved to be the Filipino trailed out of the mist.

"Sight of him intensified the queer change of heart Ching and China are inducing in me. Back in Mangshih I had regarded him with affection as the sole link between myself and a solid, familiar way of living; this morning he simply bored me. He said, 'Christ, madam, that was all hooey what I told you about me wanting to see China! We've been here since early yesterday morning, believe me, trying to fix a landslide on the next hill. We ain't had a mite to eat, and we ain't got no matches, and you'd better hire a litter and make tracks back to Mangshih for this ain't no place for a white lady anyway. The coolies have got leprosy and my men have got the willies—there's a blasted Bengali screaming his head off this minute because he swears he can't drive another yard. I don't blame him, madam, honest I don't. There's four men down with fever and the whole damned outfit have empty bellies. Sixteen cases of T.N.T. they make us load against John Chinaman's fourteen. Sweated labour, that's what it is—and supposed to work to a contract.'

"He was having a wretched time, yet my reaction was one of vague amusement, and when Joe replied serenely that time was a very little thing I thought what an eminently sensible remark it was.

"The Filipino was mad. He shouted, 'Aw, go to hell!

How're you going to carry on your war without munitions?' seized Ching by the arm and told him to come along and put the fear of God into the Highway coolies.

"Then the old bearded Sikh trotted up, his dripping turban set rakishly over one ear, and moaned about his troubles. His clothes were wet, he had lost his bedding, his men were in a state of mutiny and had we anything to eat?

"I gave him my last tin of sardines, whereupon the dormouse did one of her awakening acts, rated the Sikh for complaining about nothing when the Chinese up in the north were living on cakes made out of mud and straw, and handed Joe and myself a couple of water biscuits apiece.

"We were pleased to see the Sikh amble off, but the biscuits made Joe argumentative and he chipped me about landslides until I rammed on my coolie hat and ploughed through the mud to view the 'next hill' for myself. Considering the surfaces we had already negotiated it wasn't so bad. For the space of about a dozen yards on the usual almost perpendicular slope a foaming torrent cascaded across the road, but at its deepest the water only came up to the calves of my legs, so I turned to Ching and went through a desperate pantomime of guiding a steering-wheel which, being highly intelligent, he understood at once and set off at a lope for our bus.

"'If you want to see a real landslide,' I told the Filipino coldly, 'go back about ten miles.'

"He was furious, answered that driving through the torrent was going to be more difficult than rolling a snowball through hell and that if any one was going to try it one of his drivers was since his loads were infinitely more important than ours. He hadn't many Chinese drivers but I was pleased to note he chose one of them, who stabbed the accelerator and shot forward. The next moment I regretted my nasty remark for the truck splashed, swayed, teetered on the edge of the precipice and suddenly shot downwards in a series of complete somersaults, coming to rest wrong side up some two hundred feet below the road. Between the first somersault and the last seemed all eternity and I stood transfixed, for there was enough high explosive in that truck to blow the lot of us into Tibet; but to the utter amazement of every one the driver crawled from under the cab and climbed the precipice on all fours, smiling and unbruised!

"I won't repeat what the Filipino said to me in detail, but the gist of his speech was it would take the rest of the day to haul the T.N.T. cases up and he had lost one perfectly good truck for good. He ended up by announcing fiercely he wasn't going to be beaten and beckoned to a shivering Madrassi, who drove shakily towards the torrent, lifted his arms high above his head and gave vent to a piercing shriek. About ten of us put our shoulders to the truck to prevent it from joining its brother over the precipice while the Madrassi developed a fit of hysteria and the Filipino roared at me, 'My God, madam, and you still think your John can drive through that?'

"I was about as angry as he was—I hated the way he called my dear Ching 'John', so said loftily we should have a shot at it and marched back to the bus. There was no hope of getting a run at the thing since Ching had to crawl past the Armenian convoy and stop dead just short of the water, and just as he was about to charge the Filipino leapt on to the running-board yelling, 'If you're going to your death, madam, I'm going with you. Shove her into special, John, *and step on it!*'

"Ching stepped. There was a sickening lurch, reddish spray poured through the open windows, a fearful bump sent Joe sailing through mid-air to descend on my lap, the rifle-cases thudded madly—but we were across and thundering up the mountainside and we were a shade base about our triumph for we turned to blow kisses to the poor Filipino who had been jolted off and was now sitting in the middle of the waterfall. The dormouse still slept!

"*Next Morning.* My new-found humility of mind has suffered a rude shock and my glimmerings of knowledge concerning Chinese philosophy are almost destroyed. We had an uneventful afternoon yesterday just by way of a change and to enliven our tortoise-like progress up and down mountains Joe and I argued about sentimentality. I have no idea how the subject cropped up, but he informed me severely the Chinese held the greatest scorn for the stupid sentimentality of the Western races and I retaliated by saying his accounts of his wife, parents and other relatives positively oozed sentimentality, whereupon he accused me of vilifying him in Mangshih because he had displayed indifference towards death. We ended up with a lengthy discussion on the reason behind the non-significance of death being

the fact that physical torture was endured with stoicism in China or vice versa, I can't remember which. That is the trouble about Chinese arguments. They perform such alarming mental contortions that one cannot analyze them afterwards.

"I wish, however, this particular one had not finished up with death.

"To evade Joe's tongue I hauled out the typewriter while Ching went in search of water for our ever-boiling radiator, and immediately he moaned he felt very sick and if I had any humanity in me I would stop clacking the keys and fetch him a cold compress for his aching head. I couldn't resist telling him there was nothing stoical about his attitude to personal suffering and that he was being contradictory. After that, of course, he demanded to know the meaning of 'contradictory', so I took my towel, sprinkled it with water and swathed it turban-wise round his head, hoping for a little peace.

"I didn't get it. The engine behaved atrociously and on the next summit we stopped again. Parked by the side of the road was a truck. Joe, whose curiosity survived all ailments, hopped out and peered inside it, then beckoned me. Lying on filthy, soaking rags were twelve men, shaking and moaning with fever and one of them, who seemed less sick than his fellows, babbled out a long story as Joe held him up. They were surveyors who had been sent to inspect the Mangshih-Lungling section of the Highway and over a week ago their truck had broken down. The driver had set out to walk to Lungling for aid but had not returned, so for eight interminable days these twelve had lain in misery. Think of that! Eight days in pitiless rain, and of the hundred-odd trucks a day which thundered over the Highway not one had stopped to see what was the matter.

"Joe was very efficient. He and Ching, helped by the dormouse and myself, hauled the twelve into our bus, where we strewed them higgledy-piggledy on the rifle-cases, on the seats, in the luggage compartment, and set to work to clean them up as best we could. It was rather a hopeless job, but even as I worked I remembered the argument in which Joe and I had indulged so recently. He had said so violently that physical suffering simply didn't count in China, yet because inquisitiveness had caused him to peer into a truck here he was insisting these twelve surveyors should be treated with the utmost gentleness! Inci-

dentally, he shamed me into performing tasks for them I could never have tackled on my own.

"Eventually we drove on, the dormouse and I bumping into each other at every jolt as we tried to keep our patients from sliding towards the front of the bus, but when it grew dark we stopped—Ching did not dare trust the batteries. We were only four kilometres short of Lungling but the road had a terrible surface, was very narrow and was cut along a precipice side.

"So there we were! I asked Joe hopefully about Lungling Hospital and he answered primly it was a tiny mountain town six thousand feet above sea level, so of course it hadn't a hospital. What was worse, he added, it only enjoyed three consecutive days of fine weather once a year. (Somehow that piece of gratuitous information cheered me up. It was so typically inconsequential!) Anyway, I demanded to know how he thought we were going to carry the sick as far as Pao Shan when my medical supplies consisted of half a bottle of quinine, a few atropin tablets, iodine, arnica, eucalyptus and a minute roll of bandage; and he patted my back soothingly. 'They still live,' he said.

"I replied acidly they could also spit, because I had spent two hours making paper cups out of face tissues—wasted labour since the poor creatures were far too ill to hold these and continued to spit over us, the baggage and themselves; but I retained the remnants of the sort of Nightingale spirit with which Joe had imbued me and held a sibilant discussion with Miss Wei as to whether boiled water would kill our patients, while Ching got a huge fire going by the roadside, fanning its flames with his coolie hat.

"It was about midnight that the glimmerings of Chinese philosophy were altogether quenched. One man was very restless, so I sat beside him with his shoulders on my knees. He told me a story I'm trying hard to forget, and as he finished it he died. The others were unmoved; they waved a blazing paper torch above his face so that his glazed eyes stared up at us frighteningly, then Ching doubled the body up carelessly and heaved it through the wide window . . . I was acutely, hideously sick.

"I huddled close to Ching in the cab afterwards, but could not sleep. I could only shiver and think wildly. I simply *could not* go on with this ghastly journey (my grammar doubtless

Chapter Five

ENTR'ACTE IN LUNGLING

I

"Look!" cried Joe excitedly, "the new road to Tengyueh!"

Apathetically I gazed in the direction of his pointing finger. Physical weariness had got me down and I was sub-human, a sort of robot being performing mechanical tasks for the sick men, and sight of coolies and their families making a cobbled pathway by fetching stones and dumping them in the mud did not awaken my interest. Why make a road to Tengyueh, to Pao Shan or to anywhere else; surely the road from Mangshih to Lungling was enough? "Must we stop here?" I demanded fretfully.

"Lungling Customs, most important."

They did not look it. There were three long huts, there was a petrol dump, there were four slovenly-looking hillwomen and a cow. "I'm so hungry," said the dormouse wistfully.

"In ten minutes we shall be in the main street; there is a fine restaurant."

I had never believed in a watering mouth until that instant. Mine simply dribbled.

We waited, and we waited. There were trucks ahead of us, and trucks parked alongside us, and trucks behind us. Ching still held the wheel, his head bowed on his hands; the sick men still moaned; the rain still poured down. I tried to figure out what o'clock it was. Ching had started tinkering with the engine at five, it had taken him three hours to get her going, how long had it taken us to cover the four miles to Lungling?

Joe said precisely, "If it takes three days to cover thirty-six kilometres, how many kilometres can be covered in . . . ?"

It sounded like one of those awful sums in proportion set to tease the infant mind at school. "Oh, do be quiet!"

The dormouse said, "It is twenty minutes past eleven."

Joe began lightning calculations on the back of an envelope

and announced that our average speed this morning had been 1.35 miles per hour. "And a kilometre is five-eighths of a mile, so . . ."

" . . . what have you?" I finished nastily.

A Customs official poked his head in at the window, caught sight of me and gave a loud yelp. While he was recovering we jolted slowly on into Lungling, which seemed to consist of one immensely long narrow street that tumbled downhill to a flat plain and contained a solid mass of trucks. On either side of the trucks endless queues of Chinese shuffled along in the mud and beyond the mud were countless small shops, all doing a roaring trade.

"Bazaar day," said Joe.

We chugged to rest between a baker's on one side and a queer window on the other wherein an aged pig-tailed man sat cross-legged teasing cotton-yarn. Joe and Ching held an earnest conversation after which the former said it might be possible to park our patients with somebody until we left on the following morning. "But first of all we must eat."

Forty-eight hours earlier I should have been horrified at the mere suggestion of leaving eleven sick men while we ate; now I stepped out of the bus without a qualm, even helping Ching to lock the doors against the thieves who abounded in this mountain town. China was definitely having its effect upon me, despite my revulsion of last night, and I became vaguely aware philosophy might glimmer again.

The restaurant was at the bottom of the street and we sat down at a table littered with dirty plates and bowls. "Noodles," I remarked raptly, "lots and lots of noodles, and fried chicken, and runner beans cooked in butter, and bamboo shoots."

An enormously fat Chinese appeared from behind a greasy curtain. "He is sorry," interpreted Miss Wei, "but it is bazaar day and he is sold out of food."

We tottered out and walked back up the street until we reached a butcher's shop. In its small window hung curious cuts of meat literally black with flies; inside half China stood, sat or lay on the floor, supping noisily from bowls. "Here we are," Joe smiled, "excellent chow."

The admirable Ching sniffed once and expressively, and walked away; the rest of us trailed in and Miss Wei began to

talk to the Cantonese proprietor, who stood behind an enormous chopping-board cutting up fearful-looking entrails, while his three tiny boys—they appeared to be triplets—dashed to and fro serving the customers. Two drivers hauled forth a stained table and a bench on to which we sank thankfully, and the little boys brought large bowls of noodle-soup-stew, fat-smearing chopsticks and spoons.

Even now memory of that Lungling butcher's revolts me. At the time I was so famished that I plunged the spoon into the bowl, shut my eyes and gulped a mouthful of its contents. Most strangely, the taste was delicious, although the meat was heaven knew what bit of heaven knew what animal and the noodles were liberally besprinkled with cooked flies, cockroach legs and kindred oddments.

"Have a second bowlful?" inquired Miss Wei a few minutes later.

I nodded. "Excellent chow!"

We had decided at the start of our journey to take it in turn to settle for meals we had in eating-houses. It was my turn to-day and the charge for six bowls was thirty cents. "Too expensive," frowned Miss Wei, and I gaped for in English money I had spent just over twopence!

Over our green tea, provided free, we discussed the problem of the sick men. "Remember that restaurant?" asked Joe. "There is plenty of room there."

We tramped back through the mud and interviewed the proprietor, who obviously regarded us as crazy but was not averse to accepting fifty cents and our patients. Heartlessly we dragged, heaved and carried them from the bus and laid them on his floor; then we went shopping and forgot about them. We bought twenty cents worth of lovely-looking pears, found they were hard as bullets and sent Joe cantering back to demand the return of our money, a request which led to a free fight between the old stall-woman and himself. We bought two more coolie hats to keep the rain off; we inspected the rough chinaware made locally, the frightening fire-crackers and the gigantic umbrellas for which Lungling is famous; we turned quickly away from the stalls piled high with mealies and we invested in several squares of thin oilcloth to protect our baggage from the wet.

Trailing back to the bus we found Ching in the baker's shop

buying rough biscuits made of rice flour. They were good, so good that I spent the latter part of the day throwing twenty cent notes out of the bus window on to the counter in payment for extra half-pounds. But since early in the morning I had realized that a second disease had designs on me—dysentery; so I said to Joe, "I don't think I can stand another night in the bus. Is there no sort of lodging in Lungling?"

He beamed upon me. "Ah, yes, there is a fine European hotel, come along!"

We went to inspect the "European Hotel". It was a derelict building at the bottom of the hill, and its broken windows faced a wide and stagnant canal. Rats scampered merrily through its bare, echoing rooms, and the owner had ex-ophthalmic goitre and inch-long finger-nails.

I fled.

Suddenly a brilliant idea struck Joe. "There is a missionary here, a wonderful person. Perhaps you could take your bed there for the night. I have to make a call on an old friend, but Ching will lead you to the mission."

We walked through the rain, and we walked, and with every step my determination not to sleep in the bus grew. Eventually we reached a square building that boasted a rusty bell beside its doorway. Ching pulled at it and in response to a clanging fit to wake the dead a Chinese boy appeared.

I said, "Is Mr. — at home?"

He said, "Jesus Christ is out."

Slowly we retraced our steps; it would have to be the bus after all.

II

The Filipino was sitting on the running-board. "Oh, madam, have you seen the food in this hole?"

"I've eaten it."

"You ask for death, you know. Listen, madam, can you change me a five-dollar bill? They ain't got no change in this one-eyed outfit and I ain't got no small denomination notes."

Obligingly I lugged out the enormous package achieved from Mr. Chen in Rangoon and doled out ten, twenty and fifty-cent

notes. Within ten minutes all the Indian drivers of the Filipino's convoy were swarming round the bus waving five-dollar bills under my nose, and for a good hour I acted as money-changer, aided by Ching, who had a sharp eye for dud notes. Climax came when a shifty-eyed Bengali tried to palm five bad rupees on me and I told the Filipino to remove his underlings.

He shoed them out of the bus, but remained himself. "See, madam, here is a photograph of my wife and two little girls. Gee, but a happy marriage is a wonderful thing, isn't it? They're 'way back in Rangoon—now that's a gay spot if you like! Whenever I go back I beat the hell out of the dance-halls—and here's my card, John Shiel's the name and I chose it because I like the Scots, they're a darned sight less high-hat than the English. Say, but I'm having trouble with my drivers! They're so bloody fed up they're looting each other's gear, and I've a chap back up the line in tears because he's lost a blue pull-over his mother made him. But what can I *do*, I ask you?"

A voice answered with some asperity from the front step: "You can send a truck back to fetch my baggage and bedding."

The speaker was the old Sikh, who was extremely angry. It appeared that the truck containing his worldly goods had been left behind because of a breakdown, and he now found himself bedless in Lungling.

"Aw, hell," answered the Filipino. "We'll have a strike if I ask one of the men to drive back darned near eight kilometres in this rain. You sleep hard for once, buddy, it won't hurt you."

"I am not a buddy," said the Sikh in a dignified voice.

"O.K., I'll call you something else," retorted the Filipino—and did.

I rolled myself in a blanket, thumped the sodden pillow against the window-frame and lay down. They could argue themselves silly; I was going to sleep. From very far away came the Filipino's voice: "Say, madam, I can't eat the chow here, have you any food?"

I groped in the Shan bag, hurled the last tin of sausages at him and lay down again.

Ching shook me awake and pointed to the window. Crossly I levered myself up and peered out straight into the face of a diminutive policeman behind whom seemed to be gathered the entire population of Lungling. He gabbled excitedly and

stretched up a skinny paw. I shook it warmly—courtesy always pays with the law—but he snatched it away with a terrified expression and gabbled a lot more at Ching, who pointed to my bag. Joe was still absent and Miss Wei was asleep, and I, who had developed second sight in the matter of nail-files and torches, was wholly unable to determine what it was the policeman desired. Finally I strewed the contents of the bag on the seat and invited Ching to take his pick. He seized my passport and handed it to the policeman.

The population applauded; the policeman opened the passport and whisked its pages until he came to the Chinese visa. Holding the book at arm's length, he turned it this way and that—he was plainly unable to read his own language.

I leaned out of the window, and immediately the crowd surged towards me, shouting and gesticulating. "What is wrong?" came Miss Wei's muffled voice.

"I wish to peace you'd find out for me."

In a minute she and the policeman were at it hammer and tongs. Presently she translated. "He was told there was a strange creature in one of the convoys by the Customs man, and he wants to take your passport to the police station to make sure that it is correctly stamped and really belongs to you."

"Well, tell him that the passport is not going to the police station and that if anybody wishes to see it they can come here."

There was a frantic scene then, the policeman rolling his eyes, stamping and blowing on his whistle, but in a few minutes a colleague joined him and together they pored over the passport, while the crowd tried to climb the bus.

Exasperated, I turned to Miss Wei. "Don't let them walk off with that passport. I'm going to sleep again."

But she was laughing immoderately. "So funny! That old woman hanging on to the window said, 'What is that strange animal you have with you in the bus?'" and Ching told her you were a giant panda."

Europeans who hold the belief that Chinese faces are expressionless should visit Lungling. For the next two hours the inhabitants swarmed round the bus, eyes popping out of their heads with astonishment, jaws dropping on their chests while Joe, who had returned at the double thinking we had suffered a mishap, regaled them with fantastic accounts of how he had

captured me in the wilds of Tibet, and the policemen looked more and more worried, obviously cogitating the why and wherefore of a giant panda having a passport. Eventually they released the incomprehensible document with a sigh and moved off, but the crowd remained and when night fell they were still standing in the mud, eager yellow faces upturned to my window.

III

We wheedled some boiled water from the baker, ministered to the sick and revisited the butcher's, where our supper was similar to our dinner except for the fact that it contained less meat and more flies. The tiny shop was packed with our convoy drivers, who had been drowning their sorrows in rice spirit, and an extremely drunk overseas Chinese from Singapore lurched across and sat down next to me. "They said (hic) 'Come and fight for China', and what do I get but driving a truck up bloody great (hic) mountains for sixteen National dollars a month! S'not right; you're a (hic) Englishwoman and you *know* it isn't right! You tell the British Government—sixteen bloody National dollars a (hic) month!"

I had sympathy with him. Carrying ammunition across the Highway for less than a pound a month was a bit hard, and sitting in that smoky little room watching the haggard but cheerful faces of our drivers I remembered the cold hand-clasp of the Sawbwa of Mangshih, the exotic beauty of his garden, the treasures lining his palace, the sumptuousness of his eighteen Chevrolets. China still held many Mandarins such as he, and although doubtless they contributed to war funds in ways of which I did not know, they clung tenaciously to the riches whence came their power and regarded the mass of the people as animals, units of labour, so much cannon-fodder.

Despite their high estate they possessed less philosophy of spirit than the humblest coolie.

Another man spoke to me. Son of an American father and a Chinese mother, he had been born and educated in San Francisco. "You must not judge China by Lungling, nor by the foolish speech of disappointed men who have drunk too much. You must

search in China for the serenity of mind you will never find in any other country. She holds that secret jealously, close to her heart, but you will uncover it if you seek for it sincerely."

I stared up at him. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and only the pigment of his skin was Asiatic. "What are you doing here?"

He smiled. "I like war," and pushed aside his loose white shirt. Across his breast was a livid, curving cicatrice. "Near Pekin I won that. They won't accept me for the Army any longer, but what does that matter? I can still drive a truck up the 'bloody great mountains'."

We talked then of the Golden Gate, of islands in the Southern Pacific, of the unforgettable smell of Singapore harbour; but when he rose saying simply that as he had no money he must fetch some wood and stoke the butcher's fires in payment for his supper, his words about China hummed through my brain. "*Serenity of mind.*" He was right. Through all her sufferings, her struggles, her appalling sacrifices, China retained serenity.

Splashing our way back to the bus, Joe said, "I had some good news from my friend this afternoon. He told me the shares I hold in the Philippines have declared a fine dividend."

I stopped in the middle of a puddle, the water dripping from my coolie hat. Joe was my dearest Chinese friend; I admired his gaiety, his kindness, his shrewd business acumen. But he stowed half an adequate salary away in the Philippines while the man who knew China's secret stoked fires for his supper. It was all very confusing.

Ching also had been indulging in rice spirit. He began an animated conversation with Joe which threatened to go on until all hours, so I suggested mildly he might drive on to the plain, where we could sleep more peaceably than in the main street. "Oh, no!" shrieked Miss Wei, "think of all the bandits!" and Joe interpreted that Ching was so afraid of the Lungling thieves that he wished I would lend him my gun.

"I haven't got one."

"What? But *all* foreigners carry guns?"

"Not those with a grain of sense. It is asking for trouble, besides being the gravest insult you can offer to a country kind enough to let you travel through it."

Joe began to argue. He couldn't understand my viewpoint

at all and it would be entirely my own fault if I were raped, beaten up or murdered before we reached Kunming.

Tired as I was I couldn't resist this challenge. "You're not afraid of cruelty or death; why should I be?"

That settled it; we fenced wordily for another hour until I swaddled myself firmly in the blanket and lay down.

But not to sleep; oh, dear me, no! Only a few feet from my head the baker's boys thumped the dough steadily, and he himself invited two or three cronies in for a little opium-smoking. The sickly scent of the drug drifted through my open window to mingle with the variety of smells already in the bus, and the raucous Cantonese speech went on and on, and the mosquitoes buzzed angrily round my aching body. Occasionally a shadowy figure reared up outside the window, heard my slight movement and dropped stealthily to the ground again, and through the darkness came wails, snatches of song, the hiss of rain.

Tired as I was I did not mind the hundred sounds which kept sleep from me. I liked Lungling. It was the first really Chinese town I had seen, and even in the rain it had glowed with colour. And I had eaten well for the first time in many days. Guiltily I realized that the stuffing of my tummy had played a major part in the re-lighting of my spark of philosophy, so definitely I did not yet own the genuine variety achieved so gloriously by a people inured to starvation. Turning my head, I blinked at the lamplight which streamed from the baker's shop, revealing within its glassless window the ecstatic faces of the opium-smokers. To-morrow these men would set forth again in the rain to till the pitifully thin soil of this mountain region, to cope with the ever-recurrent problem of how to keep the emaciated bodies of their families and themselves alive. Not for them any State aids, grants or pensions, any social services, any protection against disease or death. Quite alone they had to face their elemental struggle, but the overseas driver from San Francisco had been right; in some mysterious way they drew from China, the country unable materially to help her people, serenity of spirit. Maybe the kindly baker allowed them fifty cents worth of cooked opium every week or two—less than a glass of beer meant to the average Western working man; otherwise their existence was completely grim. Or was it? Through my drowsy brain danced an elusive memory, not of something

heard or read but of something experienced by myself. I couldn't capture it but dozed uneasily until the monstrous clock which was the baker's pride struck five.

Shaking Ching awake, I pointed towards the restaurant where our sick men lay and he nodded, whereupon I turned my attentions to Joe. "It is daybreak."

He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and sat up, a comical figure with black hair sticking up in tufts from his head. I thought how different he looked from the dapper person in well-creased suit and spotless linen who had greeted me in Lashio, then smiled as I remembered I must appear even dirtier than he, since three days and nights in Chinese mud and a nearly waterless bus did not exactly leave one well groomed.

A second driver loomed up out of nowhere. He was to travel with us as far as Pao Shan. "Splendid," cried Joe excitedly, "he can relieve Ching and we shall reach Pao Shan by dusk."

Once again my tongue got me into trouble. "If it takes three days to travel thirty-six kilometres, how long does it take to travel two hundred and fifty?"

We were still arguing as we heaved our patients back into the bus. They looked, if possible, sicker than they had done the previous evening, but we fed them on crumbs of Lungling biscuit soaked in boiled water and parked them as comfortably as we could. "It's terribly crowded for them," I remarked, and scowled at the back of the relief driver.

Joe followed my glance. "Nonsense," he replied briskly. "This new man merely takes the place of the surveyor who died the day before yesterday."

Chapter Six

CROSSING SALWEEN

I

IN honour of our departure Lungling was indulging in one of its three fine days a year, and as we bumped down to the plain I forgot the tribulations of yesterday, the groans of the eleven sick men in the back, my own disgusting state of filth and the aches and pains which beset me. I remembered only that all my life I had wanted to see Salween, that mighty river which flows from Tibet through Yunnan Province to Moulmein.

The sun rose redly above the wine-dark peaks ahead of us, illuminating the vast amphitheatre of the plain with a hundred flashing colours, for the marshlands on either side of the Highway glittered with little iridescent pools between which grew tall feathery grasses, flowering bushes, Chinese lilies standing sentinel behind their thick stiff leaves. Far to the north massed the black mountains of Tibet, their rocky flanks gleaming crimson in the dawn light, and to the south reared more mountains, range upon range of them towering to the skyline.

I glanced back at Lungling, clinging so precariously to its steep slope, and saw inky clouds piling up behind it; the fine day was not going to materialize after all and I said so to Joe, who grinned and pointed at Ching's back. "He does not want the bad weather to catch us up."

Certainly he was doing his best to prevent it doing so, for the bus bounded, leapt and rattled over the rough rutted road and the speedometer showed the incredible figure of thirty miles an hour. Watching the needle my exhilaration grew; flying eastwards before the pursuing rains was a grand sensation and Joe made me more cheerful still by informing me that from now on we stood a reasonable chance of beating our watery enemy.

The road surface improved as we began to climb. No sooner had we spiralled up one mountain than another larger one rose

before us, "like a procession of giants" as Joe remarked, and eighteen miles from Lungling we reached an altitude of 8,000 feet, the highest point on this section of the Highway. Waiting for the poor radiator to recover I climbed the hundred yards or so to the peak of the summit round which the road circled and stared at beauty until my eyeballs ached. When the sun shone everything was so jewel-bright in China; the snow caps of Tibet that crowned the jet-black ramparts guarding her border, the sand-stone Yunnanese mountains that glowed all shades of red from petunia to rust, the sharply blue streaks that marked ravines and gorges, the deep rich green of the forests in the valleys, the sheen of emerald far below where the paddy ripened in its fields and above all a clear turquoise sky.

I had seen loveliness in many countries; but never such loveliness as spread its glory before me that morning on a Chinese peak.

In response to cat-calls from Ching I reluctantly clambered down to the road, the wind driving my damp clothes against my body, and poked the dormouse awake. "Do look at the mountains; they're superb."

She opened one eye. "Have we reached Pao Shan?"

I gave it up.

Through the brilliant sunshine we followed the switchback road that led across the hill-tops and found fresh magic at every turn. A field of paddy shone against a purple mountain-side, a clump of tall scarlet lilies grew beside a sapphire pool, the close turf was studded with orchids, harebells and heather made a blue and mauve carpet for golden azalea bushes, and always the mountains changed colour, lay deep in shadow, sprang into vivid beauty as the sun's rays touched them. I did not wish to reach Pao Shan; I wanted to journey on and on along this incredible Highway.

In more mundane ways too we were enjoying our day. The keen wind which whistled through the open windows might stab bodies weakened by the sticky tropic heat of the fever-belt with the force of a knife thrust, but it was clean, strong, alive—and it dried our garments. Pridefully I unhitched the washing belonging to Ching and myself which had dangled soddenly above our heads for days, smoothed it out and stowed it away in the racks, hung my pillow half out of the window to dry and fed

the sick men with Lungling biscuits which they promptly spat out.

"They look worse," remarked Joe complacently.

I glared at him. I did not wish to be reminded about the sick men; I wanted to be left alone in my world of glittering pinnacles.

He went on plaintively, "Have you any of that oily stuff which smells of lemons? The little animals are attacking me."

I handed him the citronella mixture and the cotton-wool. "Go slow with it; there isn't much left. And they're not animals, they're insects."

"Nonsense!" He thrust a hand inside his shirt-front, fumbled about and withdrew it. On his palm was a tiny horror. "See," he announced triumphantly, "it does not hop, it walks. Of course it is an animal."

From the sublime to the ridiculous. For the next hour we argued about lice, their origin, their habits and their attributes.

In the middle of a small plateau set high in the hills Ching stopped the bus and pointed to the right. Staring obediently I saw what appeared to be two square roofless and windowless buildings built of rough red stone, but Joe gave a crow of delight. "Ah, I had forgotten, the hot sulphur baths!"

"Baths?" I echoed. The mere mention of such things made me feel quite dizzy.

"Yes, yes, bring your sponge-bag and towel."

He, Ching, the extra driver and myself did not even glance at the sick men. Grabbing our things we fled from the bus and squelched across a deliciously warm bog, sniffing the sulphur exultantly until we reached the stream which bubbled from a spring by the rosy walls and was so hot we were nearly scalded as we forded it. Without more ado Ching and his companion flung off their shirts, rolled their trouser-legs up to their thighs and began to scrub themselves thoroughly but Joe led me to a sign painted on the wall. "To people from the West," he translated, "these baths are highly dangerous."

"That is ridiculous. Lots of Europeans take sulphur baths."

"Ah, but Yunnan sulphur is very strong."

For answer I slithered round the corner to a doorway and marched within. In a huge stone bath about twenty feet square

and three deep floated a naked yellow figure who gave a shrill yelp and burst into unintelligible speech.

"He thinks you are a devil," came Joe's calm voice from behind me. "He is a coolie who tends the rice on this plateau, but it is all right, I will inform him you are an honoured guest of our Government and that he must give up his bath to you."

I retreated and presently the wretched man catapulted out of the doorway holding his arm before his face lest I cast some evil spell on him and ran frantically through the bog.

"And now," said Joe, "you will have his bath and I the one in the second building. Sulphur," he added gravely, "is an excellent disinfectant."

The bliss of that bath is indescribable. Having cleansed my dirty self from head to toes I lay back, warm water around me, hot sun above me, and let all comfort soak through my body. Only then, I think, did I realize how wearying the journey from Lashio had been, how weakening that bout of fever in Mangshih, for as I lay I felt strength creeping slowly back into my bones and muscles. But had I not seen horror, endured a few minor hardships, suffered the beating monsoon rains, should I have truly appreciated the wonder of this sulphur bath? I felt sure I should not, for if I had stepped from a civilized world into this crumbling building I should have complained about the coolie, about the slimy weeds which covered the stones, about the sudden appearance of Ching who purloined my toothpaste and made off with it.

Three little birds perched on the wall and chirruped at me. A surprised bat flapped from a corner. From next door came Joe's voice upraised in song and from the stream sounded many splashings and shouts of laughter as Ching and his co-driver enjoyed themselves. Half-dozing I thought of Yunnan's rare beauty and of the sweet friendliness of China's people. My body felt suddenly light and energetic, as if it could spring from mountain peak to mountain peak, until it gained the gateway of Tibet.

Joe's voice roused me. "We have been here an hour and a half. Ching says we must get on."

I glanced distastefully at my heap of clothes. Roughly washed they had certainly been back in the gorge beyond Lung-

ling but they were not really clean, nothing was clean in our bus and it offended me to have to garb a refreshed body in such revolting things; but when I at length waded through the bog with the others I knew a such tingling sense of fitness I ceased to worry over minor details.

Picking my way across the sick men I noticed one of them had his head twisted at a grotesque angle and bent down. He was dead. Appalling as it may sound I felt no reaction at all. I felt tremendously well, I was going to Salween, I wanted something to eat. He was dead: I was alive. Beckoning Ching I pointed to the limp body. He seized its feet, I took its head, together we lifted it out of the bus and dumped it on the roadside.

Joe pulled his lip. "It reminds me," he said thoughtfully, "of an English rhyme I once heard. Something about 'ten little nigger boys and then there were nine'."

As we drove on through the blue and gold morning I taught him the whole rhyme. Neither of us gave a thought to the thing we had left lying by the Highway.

II

Ching drove magnificently, oblivious alike of gradients, precipices, waterfalls and showers of loose stones. He too felt benefit from the sulphur baths and he was delighted to be able to set his own speed without having to consider a lumbering convoy all the time, for so anxious had we been to leave Lungling that we had slid quietly off, leaving the other drivers still sound asleep.

So Ching laughed as he steered his cumbersome vehicle round astonishing corners and Joe and I devoured a hearty meal of rice cakes, candy and plantain, and Miss Wei slept and the sick men made weird noises, and we looped and twisted through the peaks until we paused on a long jagged spur, the width of which just allowed for the road. On either side the mountain fell sheer and as we peered down to our left we saw Salween river far, far below.

From no other point could we have had such a marvellous view, for so high were we above that narrow silver ribbon that we could trace its course for hundreds of miles. As it issued from

the grim black wall of Tibet it curved its way through blue and purple foothills to a wide green valley where it divided itself into half a dozen threads which united again before plunging into a deep wooded gorge, and as I turned to the south I saw the flat shining ribbon emerge from this and stretch out between the ruby coloured Yunnan mountains.

There was every kind of beauty about and around Salween and during the two hours we spent zig-zagging down towards the river we watched it in all its moods. Turbulently it crashed in the north, throwing plumes of spray against black rocks, sweetly it flowed through the valley, the placid surface of the main stream reflecting the turquoise of the sky, angrily it boiled into the gorge, the waters reddened by the churning up of its muddy bed, arrogantly it streamed swiftly between tropic jungle trees, and as I stared at it I thought that although Salween rose in Tibet and ended its long journey seawards in the Gulf of Martaban by Burmese Moulmein it was essentially a Chinese river, because through its many vicissitudes, its contradictory moods, it retained an amazing serenity.

I could not explain that serenity. It was a quality which seemed to have no place in this river of sudden tempests, swirling currents and wide floods; yet it was there, unexpected and unorthodox, and as we pulled up for petrol on a bare mountain-side where only a long flight of steps cut in the cliff betokened any sign of human life I said so to Joe who answered in a puzzled voice:

"You say Salween is unorthodox; that may be. But the Chinese are not unorthodox?"

"Oh, yes, you are. The methods by which you trade, till your soil, exploit your mineral resources, educate your people, even the methods whereby you make war are unorthodox. Despite of, or perhaps because of that unorthodoxy you hold serenity as you have held it since the world began."

He was immensely worried. I must understand that the Chinese, with their ancient civilization, were the most orthodox nation; then he seized on the point which really roused him, "What is unorthodox about our way of waging war?"

"Everything. You clapped your Generalissimo under restraint in Sian as lately as 1936, then you canonised him when he regained freedom, made him symbol of China's new-found unity.

You were in a hopeless mess internally when the Japanese created the Lukouchiao incident, yet after almost two years of war you have proved to the world that you, backward in all material ways, cannot be conquered by an invader possessing modern and highly trained and mechanized troops. You lost city after city, line of communication after line of communication and kept on retreating, allowing Japan to imagine she had thus invaded a large part of China when in reality you held and still hold the vast areas between the points she mans. You poked the war under the very nose of Shanghai . . .”

“We didn’t,” he interrupted fiercely, “why should we wish war near Shanghai?”

“Because it served to focus the attention of every other country on the Sino-Japanese conflict and whole hosts of people who had hitherto taken Japan’s act of aggression as just another little Far Eastern scrap grew terribly alarmed—there was a tremendous amount of foreign interest and money in Shanghai, and your astute Government knew it.”

“And if they did,” replied Joe huffily, “I cannot see it makes them unorthodox.” He drooped an eyelid at me to see how I was taking that one and went on, “Here comes the depot manager to speak to us.”

Procuring petrol on the Highway was a friendly business—it was also unorthodox, a fact I pointed out to Joe with pleasure. Somewhere in a cliff cave was a store of petrol and while Ching and his co-driver staggered up the steps laden with tins, the manager and two boys stepped daintily down bearing bowls of liquid rice and plates of pomegranates and custard apples for us. With them came a tiny and alert surveyor, introduced as Mr. Miao (I never found out how he spelt his name), who nearly destroyed my joy in Salween by his passion for statistics.

“I come to Kunming with you,” he beamed, brushing the mud off the bus-seat with a shabby raincoat, “I tell you, foreign lady, all points of interest. Grand suspension bridge in valley here, 860 metres long, supports ten ton load, anti-aircraft guns, sentries, have a custard apple I cut it for you?”

I sucked the gift thoughtfully. Mr. Miao drew a long breath and continued, “Bridge built many times, always wrong, Chinese engineers say ‘hell with American instructors we build our own,’ Salween river angry, knocked the piles over, very

difficult work altogether, another suspension bridge over the Mikiang I show you, also 860 metres long, also supports ten ton loads, anti-aircraft guns, sentries . . .”

I fell asleep, still clutching the custard apple, and wakened to find Mr. Miao sitting very close beside me describing the new railway which was to run from Kunming to Lashio. “Wonderful railroad, over a thousand tunnels blasted through the rocks, some track laid by Kunming, some by Mikiang, some the far side of Salween, finish next October.”

“Why build a railway when you’ve just built a road?”

“Ha,” remarked Joe satirically, “in a minute Honourable Bigland will tell you you are unorthodox.”

Fortunately Mr. Miao’s knowledge of English did not include that vexed word so Joe plunged into a wordy explanation, while I resumed my gloating over Salween. Glorious it looked, the mighty river, as we drew nearer to it and ran through the forests of its gorge where belts of fir and pine topped belts of teak and by the water’s edge the jungle trees starred with climbing orchids dipped their twisted branches above the stream, as if seeking to view their own loveliness. We left the glittering sunlight and drove along green shadowed avenues, but even in their dimness our road gleamed rosy red and at each hair-pin bend we flashed into full daylight for a second or two and caught glimpses of the mountain panorama to north or south. Down we circled and down, until the road hung just above the water, so close it seemed as if we glided along on that strong current to the bridge.

Doubtless the bridge presented a remarkable feat of engineering: for me it spoilt Salween. Built at right angles to the road it spanned the beautiful proud river in a forthright manner, a hideosity of yellow stone and steel cable decorated with a couple of turrets on which stood small and ridiculous anti-aircraft guns. Ching was having the greatest difficulty in manœuvring our bus on to it when several minute sentries dashed out of a guard-house and demanded full particulars of our load. Knowing the tenacity of certain Chinese I was surprised when they scuttered away quickly; but Joe winked, “I told them the sick men had plague and they feared infection.”

Mr. Miao wriggled his small body with excitement as we crawled across the bridge. “Very bad diseases here, fever all the

year round, hundreds of engineers died building this bridge, see the cables, foreign lady, so strong, so good? Salween not angry now, but Mikiang so difficult we must build a second bridge, I show you, now we take to the hills again."

We took to them abruptly, up a gradient of one in two and I leaned from the window full of regret at leaving Salween and imploring Joe to ask Ching to stop for a while. "You heard what Mr. Miao said about the climate?" he retorted, "we do not wish to die yet."

But I was inured to death and felt I would rather have my time come beside this river which had so sweetly fulfilled all my dreams of it. Narrower it grew and narrower as we climbed to the east, but as the road turned and ran north we saw again the magic of the wide valley veined with silver threads and now it shone pearl and rose under the setting sun.

As if in sympathy with me the engine sputtered, ceased to throb. Ching and the co-driver got out, did their usual tinkering, covered themselves with grease and indulged in an immense amount of talk. Mr. Miao nudged me, "Has the other lady the sickness of sleep they suffer in Africa?"

With difficulty I brought my mind back from Salween. "Oh, no, she finds the bus very restful."

His concern did not lessen. It was incomprehensible to him that anyone should sleep so much and he prodded poor Miss Wei awake to lecture her on her folly.

She was distinctly cross and so were the sick men roused from coma by Mr. Miao's feet on their chests, hands and legs. An angry mutter ran round the bus when Joe announced it was growing too dark to fiddle further with the engine and that we were still a hundred and five kilometres from Pao Shan. The sick men couldn't face another night in the bus, Miss Wei was starving, Mr. Miao produced a typewritten guide to the Highway which said the journey from Mangshih to Pao Shan was reckoned to take nine hours and that a picnic lunch could be partaken of at Salween bridge, even Joe was rattled. "Superb guest house at Pao Shan," he groaned to me, "it has real lavatories."

But I skipped out and stared down at the river in the fading light. The engine breakdown had given me heart's desire, a stay beside Salween. But not in the company of the ten little

nigger boys and the ubiquitous Mr. Miao; I should roll myself in blankets and rest by the roadside.

This decision called forth protests from everybody; there were snakes, insects, bandits, there might even be a Tibetan tiger strayed surprisingly from his home. I let them simmer while we boiled water for the sick to be washed in and prepared a frugal meal of rice cakes, pomegranates, sweet biscuits and a Dutch cheese which had luckily escaped the Filipino's notice. Joe caused me much amusement, for he had steadfastly refused to taste the cheese before, saying it was bad; now he sliced off hunks with a penknife and swallowed them avidly, while Mr. Miao blinked his eyes and remarked reprovingly that all foreign food was poisonous. "In Lungling," he began, "there is excellent chow, oh, excellent chow, and so inexpensive why, one may buy rice and a bowl of fine meat for a few cents and . . ."

"I know," I interrupted nastily, "in the butcher's shop with the flies."

He turned his back upon me after that but we finished our meal in peace.

The sick men were in a bad way. I had no quinine left, they all burned with fever, one of them had developed attacks of vomiting and seven of them were partially paralyzed. Regarding them dispassionately I felt how infinitely kinder it would be to give them all a crack on the head, for they would surely die lingeringly and painfully before we reached Pao Shan; then I smiled as I imagined Joe's reactions to such an idea. Death was nothing, deliberate torture was nothing, but to despatch a fellow man with one clean blow was appalling. However, I could do little to help the men except lay them straight and cover them as best I could with their filthy bits of rag, so when I had done this I hauled out my roll of bedding.

"I will not have it!" said Joe furiously.

"Don't be silly. Think how much easier you will sleep without me in the bus."

Certainly our quarters were congested, to say the least. The bus was planned to *sit* fifteen, and in it must *lie* fifteen people plus rifles, T.N.T., baggage and a few minor oddments. Eventually he capitulated with a bad grace, "But smear yourself with the lemon stuff."

I promised to do so, although I had little faith in citronella's

ability to warn off snakes, undid my bedding with herculean efforts, seized blankets and pillow and marched off. A little ahead the road widened and above the precipice was a broad patch of grass, so here I lay down, hoping I should not roll over the edge in the night.

Salween in daylight had been wonderful: Salween in moonlight was divine, lit with an unearthly beauty, flowing so calmly through the valley that was now mistily blue against the black grandeur of Tibet. From my mountain eyrie there was no sign of anger in the waters entering the gorge; they formed a sheet of purest silver that dropped between the dark curtains of the forest to ripple smoothly southwards, guarded always by the watching Yunnan hills, and from the shining stream rose a murmur no stronger than the rustle of wind in a field of grain.

Chin on pillow I lay gazing at Salween, remembering other rivers; the Rhône hurrying past Avignon, the sleepy Severn winding through Gloucestershire, the gay Vistula by Warsaw city, the sullen Niles meeting near Khartoum, the brown sweep of the Irrawaddy at Mandalay, the fierce race of the Hooghly near Calcutta, the grey flood of the Volga below Gorki's Kremlin. At one time or another each of these had held the allegiance I now transferred to this age-old, mysterious river gleaming far below me, and I knew without telling that never again would allegiance waver.

There was a faint sound beside me—Ching with his bedding. Tossing this to the ground he described in pantomime why he had left the bus, and as I turned to glance at that vehicle I felt all sympathy with him. How many nights had we spent within it, our bodies humped on hard narrow seats, above us the steady drip of rain, around us the foetid smell of fever and sickness, below us the munitions for China's war? I turned back to my view of the river and was soothed.

Ching did not swaddle himself in his blankets as I had done. He remained in a squatting position, hands clasped loosely about his knees, staring at the scene unfolded beneath us, and as I became sleepier so his figure seemed to grow until it was a vast Chinese shape silhouetted against the clear skyline and I thought comfortably, "He loves Salween as much as I do."

I dreamed that night so vividly that I awakened to memory

of dreaming, a rare happening with me. Ching and I had been wandering through the curious caves hollowed by the current from Salween's banks near Moulmein, and I had been exclaiming at the various idols installed by terrified Burmen in an effort to propitiate their gods when he had rounded on me and said: "Why use so many adjectives? You would write ever so much better if you would economise in words." He had then proceeded to lecture me in professorial manner, "The Western races crowd things together so stupidly; they juggle with masses of words, they ram twelve lilies into a vase, they hang half a dozen pictures on the walls of one small room, they seem totally unable to preserve the true essence of all beauty—simplicity."

I opened my eyes and answered: "The Chinese are such an unorthodox people"; but Ching was not a professor any longer, just a coolie squatting immobile on the edge of a precipice looking at a river and I, still only half awake, went on: "I never thought that you, who squat the night through, would become westernized; but tell me how you squat so long for I have tried many times and always my bones ache after five minutes?"

"Your bones," said Joe's severe voice behind me, "are the wrong shape. If you study the science of skeletons—I do not know the English name—you will find that Eastern limbs differ considerably from Western ones. In any case why speak to Ching in a tongue he does not understand?" Turning to the latter he spoke rapidly and Ching grinned at me. "Bigland?" Then he patted his behind, "*pegu*".

"He means," added Joe precisely, "that *pegu* is the Chinese word for that part of his anatomy which he touches."

I treasured that word, for I had determined not to journey through China without learning a phrase or so of Mandarin—the full-throated shouting I directed at Joe, Miss Wei or Ching scarcely came under the category of language, although I defy anybody who has not travelled alone with Chinese to achieve one tenth of my prowess in that unwritten, unclassified tongue used by surveyors, drivers and coolies on the Highway.

"Come along," said Joe briskly, "Ching is growing lazy; if he does not mend the breakdown quickly we shall not reach Pao Shan to-day."

Something crumbled in my brain; knowledge of Europe. "If it takes three days to do thirty-six kilometres . . ."

Joe's voice was at its most Californian: "Aw, forget that crack!"

But while Ching and his co-driver put the engine through agonies I sprawled on the very lip of the precipice speaking to a Salween which showed misted, ethereal in the dawn light. "They can talk all they want about adjectives and cracks; you've given me something I'll never find elsewhere, serenity of spirit. I won't forget. . . ."

I couldn't finish the high falutin' sentence because Salween did not deserve hyperbole. It was simply, first and last, the river of childish dreams come true.

III

Our stay had cost us dear, for the rains had caught us up. Ching drove as though pursued by a devil but they swept over and beyond us, held us in a clammy embrace. Colour died; the mountains were a sullen grey and the tall lilies were beaten to the ground; even the red ribbon of the Highway turned a dull ochre under the pitiless downpour. The sick men tossed and muttered in delirium, Joe and I crouched beneath coolie hats, Miss Wei talked in her sleep, only the redoubtable Mr. Miao retained his chattiness. Listening to his accounts of the height, depth or breadth of every mountain, valley and river in Yunnan Province I wondered why I had ever talked of the sweet kindness of Chinese friendship, for no mathematically minded pundit possessed such a passion for accuracy in detail as this little man who sat in his tightly buttoned raincoat and reeled off statistics. Having exhausted his stock of these he gave his attention to Pao Shan. "A most important city, 371,733 inhabitants, cloth is woven there and rice, wheat and beans are grown, exports to Burma are raw silk, animal hides, pine-tree seeds, peanuts, walnuts and stick-lac, imports from Burma are cotton and cotton yarn, fine telegraph office too."

"Ah, yes," added Joe enthusiastically, "Our honoured guest may telegraph from Pao Shan reserving a room at the Grand Hotel *du Luck* in Kunming. Best French cookery, very good."

I was intrigued. "'Du Luck?' Do you spell it l-u-x-e?"

"No, no, *luck*, because there is such a beautiful one in the

grounds." Fishing in his bag he produced a highly coloured folder advertising the amenities of the Grand Hotel du Lac which I accepted dubiously.

"Nonsense!" exploded Mr. Miao. "She must stay at Hotel du Commerce. I feel shame at your suggestion she should eat bad foreign food and pay for it in Indo-Chinese *piastres* when you are a member of our China Travel Service who own Hotel du Commerce."

Joe's blood was up. "We must sacrifice the custom of our honourable guest for the sake of her own safety. Imagine if she were killed in an air-raid, how inhospitable that would appear! No, no, she must endure the best French cookery—please remember Westerners actually like such food—so that she may hide in the *luck* during the raids."

In his excitement Mr. Miao continued the argument in Chinese, but as he was a Northerner who spoke Pekin Noir and as Joe only spoke Mandarin they grew very heated while I nodded between the bumps of the bus and determined that whatever happened to me I would *not* take refuge in the *luck*. But I didn't really believe any longer there was such a place as Kunming; it was a sort of bogey invented for the credulous visitor's benefit and just to complicate matters further the French called it Yunnanfou, and the English called it Yunnanfu, and . . ."

Joe shook me awake. "Is there any quinine left? One of the men is very bad."

"No, they finished it in Lungling."

The rest of that morning was ghastly. The man had developed mad strength in his delirium, so I knelt on his legs while Joe held his head and between us we pinned him down on the rifle cases while he raved and struggled. Ching had to crawl as visibility was practically nil in the cloud world through which we drove and the road surface was so poor that our progress was a series of violent leaps and lurches. We had shut the windows to keep the driving rain off the sick men so the atmosphere was abominable, we had finished the last of our food the previous night, water streamed through the ventilators and although we arranged coverings of umbrellas, coolie hats and squares of oil-silk over our invalids we could not prevent great pools forming on seats and floor.

And Mr. Miao still talked. The high clack went on and on;

it hit the ear-drums like a shower of pebbles. I gasped to Joe, "None of us understand Pekin Noir, why bother to talk?"

But at that moment the sick man gave a heave which effectively dislodged us both and sent us flying across the bus. Returning to the attack, the sweat pouring off us as we fought the poor creature, we forgot about Mr. Miao.

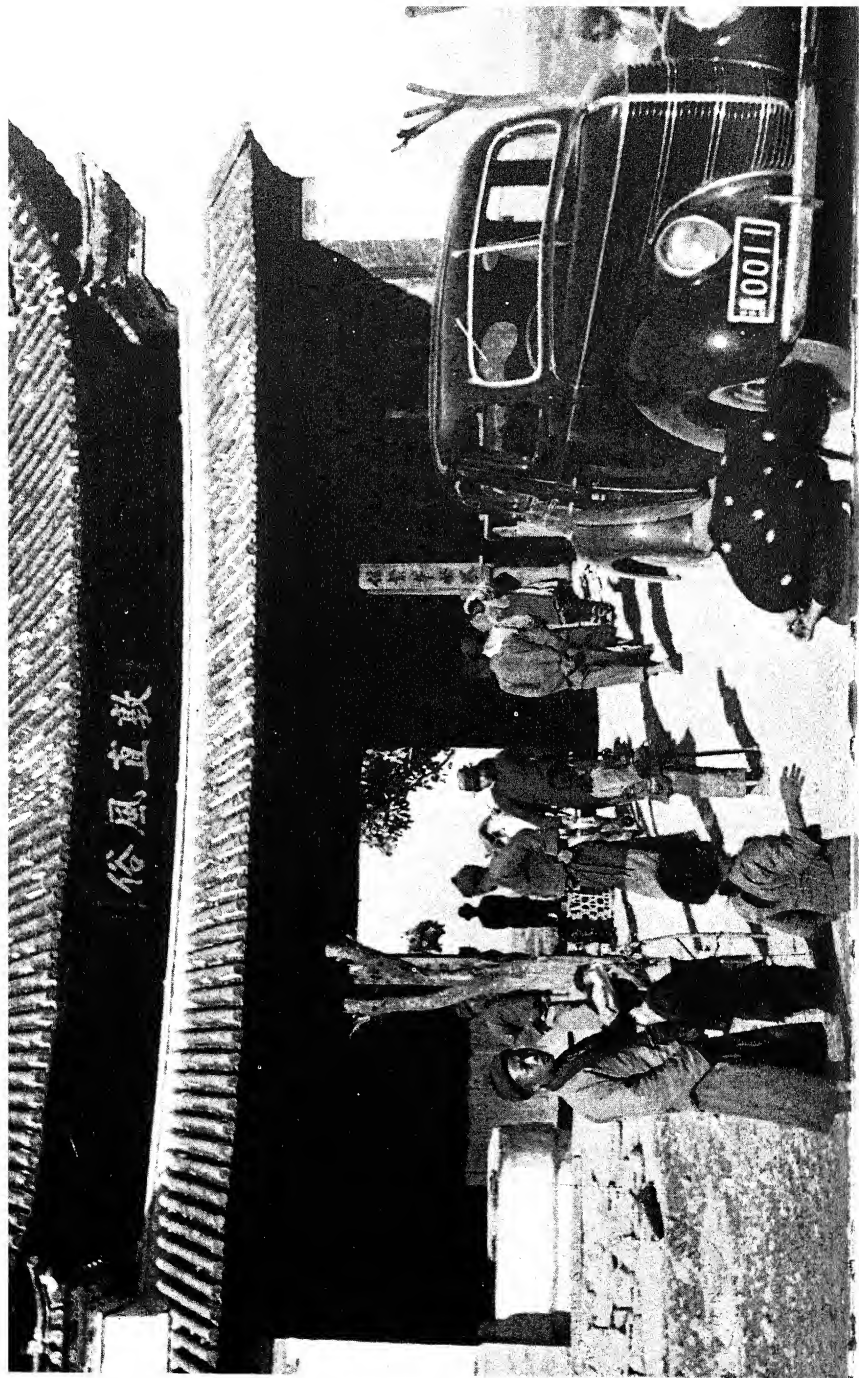
After what seemed an eternity the man stopped struggling, lay rigid. His face was grey and through his slackly opened mouth he breathed with a horrid whistling sound. "Paralysis," said Joe briefly, and mopped his neck with a huge bandanna handkerchief. "We can do no more; he will die before Pao Shan."

I squeezed into my own corner, took the head of another invalid on my lap, and tucked my feet on the back of the seat in front to avoid a third, feeling very sick. If we had not pummelled that poor devil so furiously maybe he would not be going to die, yet only a few hours ago I had thought both he and his companions should be despatched forthwith. Did one, could one ever hold the same opinion of anything for two minutes together in China? Incredible beauty of mountain and river, black pigs snuffing in the slime, the slender grace of brilliant lilies, the volley of expectoration which sounded continually, the unconquerable spirit of the men who laboured for the Highway, the hideous lingering towards a death without meaning surrounded with dirt and decay: all these things rubbed shoulders in this glorious, tragic country.

On my lap the man's head rolled uneasily and I looked down at him. His wide open eyes were like brown marbles, the skin was drawn taut over his cheekbones, saliva and blood dribbled from one corner of his mouth. Behind me Mr. Miao said severely, "It is wrong for you to hold that man, he is diseased, all disease should be left alone but Europeans are so stupid, and why do you travel in a convoy when you ought to have your own lorry, your own servants, your own interpreter as other Europeans have done when journeying along the Highway?"

I was sick, miserable, wet and exceedingly hungry; I felt I had been on the Highway since the beginning of time and my acquaintanceship with death was daily growing closer, but paradoxically I flared into anger. "What does a foreigner learn

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of China or her peoples if he travels in such state? Everything is made smooth for him, he never sees the actual conditions in the country, he never lives or makes friends with her inhabitants."

Joe joined the fray. "You do not understand, Miau. All Western explorers enjoy rough travel."

I grew even angrier. "I am not an explorer; I travel simply because I have a *wanderlust*, and my friends at home make the same mistake as Joe does when he says I enjoy rough travel. I don't, because I like comfort better than any cat, but I realize that if I relied solely upon the letters of introduction to well-known men of your race which I have in my bag I should leave China knowing less about her than when I left Lashio. It is only through contact with the people, living as they live, that I can begin to understand a little about your country."

They stared at me, mouths agape. "What is *wanderlust*?" they asked simultaneously.

I explained: they argued.

Joe said: "What she means is that she would rather sit in this bus than beside her own stove in England. Now that is a funny thing, is it not?"

"It is a bad thing," Mr. Miau's voice was decisive. "She can have no patriotism. We do not wish to travel beyond China; why should she wish to travel beyond England?"

"She writes," replied Joe apologetically, whereupon Mr. Miau retorted that Western education was deplorably insufficient and they plunged into discussion of the Nanking and other University students now evacuated to Chengtu and from that they passed to description of the city itself, lying in the shadow of the Himalayan and Tibetan mountains, while I opened my window and let the rain cool my wrath.

What really annoyed me most was that for the first time since leaving Lashio I felt conscious of a barrier between these Chinese and myself. Joe and Mr. Miau were not only puzzled but scandalized by my confession that I travelled because I liked it, and if I argued for a year it would not bring any comprehension of such an inconsequential attitude towards life, because they simply could not understand it. Already Joe was hurt by my refusals to meet various highly placed officials and had told me in exasperation, "You are not in the least bit like an English-

woman." Miss Wei had said much the same thing and at the time I had been gratified, since I took the remark as a kind of admission to friendship; but now I realized that these two who had hitherto only watched a handful of Western folk from afar had, wedged into their minds, a nice, tight little image of what an Englishwoman ought to be—and I didn't resemble that image in the least.

As for Mr. Miao, his idea of an Englishwoman resembled the caricature of an Englishman prevalent on the Parisian stage in the '80's. I was the first specimen he had met in the flesh and he was cruelly disappointed; indeed, I think he regarded me as a charlatan until the end of our journey.

Full of gloom I poked the co-driver in the back, signalled I wished to change places with him and slid into his seat next to Ching. The latter grinned and offered me an aged piece of toffee from his pocket: I grinned back and sucked the gift until peace returned. Ching was a restful person.

IV

It was well past mid-day when we stopped in a tiny hill village, the first we had seen since Lungling. "Chow!" murmured the dormouse who had actually been awake for two hours thanks to acute hunger pangs.

We trooped into the only eating-house, a curious place where-in the belles of the village squatted on the floor busily ridding the heads of their companions of unwanted occupants. "Very dirty people here," said Miss Wei casually and clapped her hands for the proprietor, the second pig-tailed Chinese I had seen. Indifferent to the fierce activity on the floor we set about our meal, making the usual small piles of gristle and bone beside our bowls, fighting over the centre bowl of noodle soup, extolling the scraps of fried chicken and condemning the slivers of pork. Sipping my green tea I wondered carelessly just how many bugs I had swallowed.

"Only thirty kilometres to Pao Shan," said Joe.

We brightened and Mr. Miao unbent so far as to assure me I was an excellent travelling companion. Surrounded by an aura of amity bred, I fear, by full and comforted stomachs, we

strolled back to the bus to find Joe's prophecy come true—the paralyzed man was dead.

"... and then there were nine," I quoted as Ching and the other driver removed the body; but Joe rushed up in a great state of agitation. "His home is in Pao Shan and his family will doubtless wish to bury him, so we must carry him that far."

Mr. Miao mingled English, Pekin Noir and Cantonese in an effort to explain that he could not possibly travel with a corpse. "Wicked," he howled at me, "very wicked indeed, will make all my important business go wrong."

"*You* are wicked," the dormouse howled back. "You should be a Christian, then you would not fear a body."

"Christianity wrong, missionaries bad, put away that body!" screamed Mr. Miao and advanced on Ching.

The clamour grew deafening. The entire village population gathered around and joined in the fray while Miao performed a sort of war-dance over the emaciated figure lying so still in the road.

I plucked Joe's arm. "Can't you shut him up? Anyway, why is he so excited?"

"Because his religion forbids him to travel with a corpse unless a priest comes to exorcise the devils first, and there is no priest here."

"Is he a Buddhist?"

"Buddhist, Taoist, I don't know. People have many religions in China but the educated Chinese," here he glared at the prancing Miao, "are atheists."

In the end Ching saved the situation by bundling the corpse into the back luggage compartment. Even then Miao insisted upon draping the wire netting partition with oil-silk, but after that he calmed down. "There is more room now," he remarked placidly, settled himself on the rifle-cases where the dead man had rested, and went to sleep.

We were so relieved we didn't rouse him to tell him his choice of bed was, to say the least, incongruous; but as we drove on I asked Joe, "You said the educated Chinese were atheists, but you and Miss Wei are Christians?"

"Oh, yes, we owe much to the missionaries, particularly the American ones. They are very fine people and have helped our education schemes enormously. Why, thirteen great Univer-

sities have been fostered by them. You heard us speak of Chengtu? Well, when the Japanese bombed Nanking, Canton, Hangchow, Soochow and other cities the Universities removed to Chengtu where a wonderful central faculty has been created. The students from Nanking had a terrible journey there, they died in hundreds. The Japanese wanted to bomb Universities especially because they felt an educated China was a more formidable foe than an illiterate one, but latterly they have given up such raids since they dare not alienate American sympathy too much lest supply of war materials across the Pacific is forbidden."

"That is very interesting; but I want to know more about the religious side. Do all your students at Chengtu and elsewhere become converted to Christianity?"

"More or less," he replied comfortably. "It is a very sound religion and we have a high regard for the missionaries; they have brought much education to China, taught us how to study social and economic subjects, helped us enormously to modernize our land in every way. Nowadays, thanks to their teachings, even the coolies may send their children to state schools if they wish. There is no compulsion, of course, but many take advantage of the scheme because an educated child can make more money for his parents than an uneducated one." He sighed deeply and went on, "The tragedy of this war! Ten thousand brilliant students, the very flower of China's youth, fell before Nanking."

I retreated into my corner and pondered this speech. From it and from discussions held previously with the dormouse I formed the view that the Chinese in their vast anxiety to bring modern civilization to their country had, so to speak, been obliged to swallow Christianity en route. It did not seem to touch them except in a purely surface manner, but it was a means to an end.

"You know," Joe resumed suddenly, "that our Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek is a Methodist?"

I gaped. "What?"

"Oh, yes. When he divorced the wife who had borne him four sons and married Miss Soong he became a Methodist to please her. But I do not think it matters to him very much; probably he is really still an atheist."

That news shook me. Nothing I had heard or read of China's

leader had prepared me for a divorcé who had embraced the Methodist faith. Hastily I turned the subject, "Is there much divorce in China?"

Joe shook his head. "No, it is not really allowed. If husband and wife have severe disputes then our legal authorities smooth them out. You must understand, of course, that in China all women live according to very strict standards. The men go out and make love; the women must stay at home and say nothing."

"I see; but to whom then do the men make love?"

"Our country has many prostitutes," he replied gravely, then added, "most of them are highly intelligent."

"But women are growing emancipated," interrupted the dormouse from the back seat. "He will not tell you, Honourable Bigland, because he is a man, but at our Universities now we play games and converse as intellectual equals with the men students. Both at Lingan and at Yenching, which is near Peking, I made many men friends—that is why I write so many letters."

"Yes," said Joe, "but when you get married you will give up such friendships and sit at home looking after your husband. That is only right. My wife was a school teacher like Miss Wei," he went on, turning to me, "but it would not be correct for her to work any longer."

I argued: "But take the dormouse as example. She is twenty-six now and she has spent twenty-one years of her life at school or college. Why should all the knowledge she has amassed be wasted just because she happens to marry, when you yourself admit the crying need for qualified teachers all over the country?"

The dormouse applauded: Joe was cross. "Not correct," he repeated flatly. "A wife's place is at home."

"You are stupid and old-fashioned," she flared at him. "What would our Madame Chiang Kai-shek say if she heard you air such views?"

"She is different," he replied with dignity and pulled out some papers which he began to peruse.

The dormouse winked at me before relapsing into slumber and I sat back, trying to fit the pieces of this absorbing Chinese puzzle together. The trouble was they wouldn't fit. When you stood back from the Chinese scene it looked perfect, a thing of glowing beauty; when you peered closely you saw innumerable pieces were missing.

V

Although still in the clouds we were going steadily downhill and I felt rather relieved that thick white mist blotted out our view because, inured as I was to the astonishing faculty of our bus for clinging to a slippery road that curled along mountain sides, I felt too tired and wretched this afternoon to stare at any more precipices, partly because a sudden rush of returning traffic from the east forced Ching to honk violently at each blind corner—and the Highway possesses an average of five blind corners a mile.

Warped by the rains the shut windows refused to open and the open ones refused to remain shut, so I staggered from one side of the bus to the other vainly trying to keep the wet off the nine little nigger boys, returning to my corner every few minutes to sit down with a splash in a large puddle of water.

Joe tucked his papers away and studied his watch. "We should be in Pao Shan by five o'clock. I trust they will have enough rooms for us at the guest-house. It is a very grand one and always full up."

I regarded myself doubtfully. My silk shirt clung to me and was streaked with dirt; my khaki skirt had a jagged tear in the front and a huge patch of damp at the back where I had sat in the puddle; my Shan shoes had an inch-thick coating of red mud and my limbs were a mass of mosquito-bites. I was not exactly garbed for entry into a "very grand guest-house", but the idea that rooms might not be available was too much. "They'll *have* to put us up," I told Joe.

"Oh, if they can't we can sleep on the office table at the Yunnan-Burma depot," he answered. "And you have a bed of your own so you are all right."

I poked the roll of bedding with my toe. It had been wet in Mangshih; now it was sodden and at each poke the water squelched through the hold-all. I gave way to temperament. "My dysentery is getting worse, and I've got lice, and I'm sure I'm in for another go of fever."

His eyes beamed at me from behind their round spectacles. "Oh, Honourable Bigland, please laugh again. You have laughed

all the way from Lashio, you can't be sad now. Only a little distance to Pao Shan and there we will cure your dysentery and you will rest for two days in the temple."

"But you said there was a guest-house?"

"So there is, it is an ancient temple now converted and so very beautiful that you will love it."

Somehow the idea of staying in a temple pleased me, and just then Ching turned and pointed out of his window. As if by magic we dipped from the clouds into a clear sunlit world and far below the wooded hills stretched a wide peaceful plain. Through my window drifted the clean smell of pine and as I leaned out I saw myriads of blue-birds flashing above the trees. Ching laughed softly at my expressions of delight and beside me Joe, whose stock of English nursery rhymes had grown steadily under my tuition, chanted solemnly,

"Doctor Foster went to Glo'ster

In a shower of rain.

He stepped in a puddle right up to his *muddle*

And never went there again."

For the hundredth time I corrected him, "Middle, not muddle."

"It cannot be, it does not rhyme, it must be *muddle*. Oh, it is so like you, Bigland, but you have sat and not stepped in a puddle. "Doctor Foster went to Glo'ster . . ."

In self-defence I climbed over and sat next Ching again. Loudly, in a series of ahs, and oos, and ohs, we sang the marching song of the guerilla armies until Miao awakened and joined in and even the nine little nigger boys showed faint signs of interest.

Down we racketed to the plain, sweeping between the tall pine trees, bumping along the flat rutted road towards the blur of smoke on the horizon that was Pao Shan, and at five o'clock to the second we panted up to the South gate of the city. Lovely it looked in the rich afternoon sun with its old carvings, its stone dragons crouching as though to guard the people within from invasion, its brilliant blue lettering. Two men swung open the huge studded door and we passed through into a street so narrow that it just held the bus.

The excitement of the inhabitants was terrific. They had never seen a bus before, so they streamed from shops and houses howling at the pitch of their voices and crowding round the strange vehicle, oblivious of the mud that splashed up from its wheels. In our progress towards the North gate we killed three pi-dogs; how we did not kill the babies who rolled in the gutters I do not know. Three times we had to stop and remove the vast umbrellas hung over their stalls by shopkeepers and behind us ran the population, pointing at me and gesticulating violently.

"Ten cents a look," grinned Joe, and I knew relief when at length we reached a wide barrack square on the high ground north of the city. "Here we are." Joe leapt out and disappeared through an old carved doorway, while the soldiers who were drilling in the square dropped their rifles and came across at the double to see who and what we were. Their officer arrived last and pointed a yellow finger at me, "European woman!" he exclaimed.

Mr. Miao beamed. He had temporarily changed his opinion of me; I was now quite an asset. "All the way from England," he told the officer. "She is the honoured guest of our Government and she likes the bus travel because she has a thing they call *wanderlust*, but it makes her sick, all the way from Salween we have had to keep stopping the bus for her."

I hid my diminished head under a coolie hat, but just then Joe returned with the grand news there was room for Miss Wei, me and himself in the temple. "Miao can sleep at the office and the sick men will go to the hospital."

Basely I felt glad to be quit of our invalids—and Miao, and helped Ching sling our baggage on to the poles held out by a couple of coolies. So thin and bent were these men that it seemed a sheer impossibility for them to bear any weight, but to my surprise the weaklier of the two set off at a jog-trot with my bedding, case and typewriter. "This way," said Joe, and led me through the doorway to a flight of stone steps cut in the side of a hill.

At the top of that flight was another, at the top of the second a third. We climbed and we climbed until my protesting limbs gave way beneath me and I sat down in the cool shadow of an ancient arch.

"Where is this temple?" I panted.

Joe smiled down at me. "In heaven."

I staggered on, climbed yet another flight, stood enraptured before a golden building that dreamed in the sun, Flame of the Forest trees ablaze around it. Joe was right; this was heaven.

Chapter Seven

THE TEMPLE-DWELLERS OF PAO SHAN.

I

I sat on the wide stone seat running round the temple balcony, sipping fragrant tea. The stone was warm, the air was warm, the setting sun tipped the pagoda roofs with gold. Beneath me was a garden where peaches ripened, and bougainvillea rioted, and lovely unknown creepers blossomed on the rosy walls, and beyond was the city, closely huddled within its high grey ramparts, and far across the plain showed the crimson Yunnan mountains. I looked to the west; the mountains there were black under low storm clouds. I looked to the east; fairy steeples of pink and mauve climbed a pale sky. Behind me to the north rose dark slopes of pine trees, for all around this fertile upland plain the hills stood sentinel. Out of the silence came the wail of a bugle from the barracks; somehow it was an odd sound to hear in China.

The sun dipped to the clouds and in the failing light I walked through the lofty dining-room with its domed ceiling to the central courtyard of the temple where green tubs held hydrangeas, fuschias, oleanders and tiny peach trees bearing golden fruits. The manager said: "Parts of the temple are still in use. If you take this passage to the left you will come to them."

The stones were very smooth, polished by countless bare feet through the centuries, and the main temple was guarded by a huge iron grille, so standing on the step I grasped its massive bars and stared within. A great figure of Buddha glittered in the shadows and before it on a long dusty table the joss-sticks smouldered in their bowl, while on either side strange gods stood in homage. It was a dim, eerie place belonging to a bygone age and as I watched a rat scuttled along the table and up the Buddha's side to crouch on his high shoulder, little beady eyes regarding me.

Next door was a second temple devoted to the twenty-eight

signs of the Chinese zodiac, and this had only three sides, the fourth being an open space. The principal god here was Thunder, a terrifying figure in a scarlet coat with gold hands, feet and face and a curling black beard. Before him two servers knelt proffering platters of food and round the two side walls were ranged the other gods of the zodiac, their symbols painted on the rough whitewash behind them.

I tried to identify these, but age and weather had smudged many of them until they were undecipherable. One was a tiger, another a water buffalo, a third a dog, a fourth a snake, a fifth a rat, a sixth a goat, and the various gods, while vicious in feature, lacked the frightening appearance of Thunder because their extremities were not painted gold. All the same these statues fascinated me. Fashioned crudely and in the remote past, they yet held an astonishing quality of life and, gazing at them, I understood just how generations of coolies had grovelled in fear before their cruel wrath. Some of them snarled, others sneered, one had the lips drawn back from the teeth in a vulpine grin, all showed man what wicked vengeance they would wreak if he dared to disobey their edicts.

Before dusk fell I had discovered that Thunder's arms were in reality a couple of Ming vases, but the temple of the zodiac was scarcely a place in which to linger in the dark. Turning to go, I met a couple of soldiers carrying gaudy paper flowers which they laid before the rain god, prostrating themselves on the dusty floor to do so. Having suffered so much rain myself lately I felt a fellow feeling with them, but they were clearly agitated by my presence so I left them at their devotions.

Joe met me in the courtyard. "Have you had your bath?" he asked eagerly. "And have you visited the real lavatories?"

I told him "yes" and went on up winding wooden stairs to the balcony above the courtyard and my sweet small bedroom beneath the eaves of the pagoda which looked out on the city. Truly Pao Shan was heaven and, apart from its beauty, it had given me comforts long forgotten; smiling boys who whisked away all my dirty clothing to be washed and my soaking bedding to be dried, an immense wooden tub filled to the brim with scalding water, a wooden bed covered with a cosy Chinese quilt and a hard round bolster, even an oil-lamp for the dressing-table that actually boasted a mirror.

And, of course, the "real lavatories" which, I reflected, deserved a whole book to themselves. They consisted of a long row of boxes upon which people sat and conversed amicably with their neighbours, and since I myself had held a most interesting conversation with an elderly and bewhiskered gentleman about Confucianism on the one side, and an equally interesting talk about the New Life Movement with a bird-like small woman on the other, I considered the friendly atmosphere pleasant.

"But definitely unorthodox," I added now as I rolled myself in the quilt and decided on forty winks before dinner.

II

Joe introduced people at lightning speed. "Mr. Liu, Mr. and Mrs. Lee and their little boy and girl, Mr. Yang, Mr. Wong, Mr. Fang."

I blinked stupidly under the yellow lamplight for I hadn't seen such high society since leaving Lashio and I wasn't quite sure how to behave at what threatened to be a Chinese dinner-party. An alert small man broke the tension by skipping up to me. "I am Mr. Fang (pronounced Fung), I always say take the G off and you have all the fun in the world. Ah, but you are a newspaper woman, are you not? I am always afraid of those since I met one in San Francisco." Here he plunged into an unprintable but highly amusing story at which the Chinese roared with laughter.

After that things went easily. The Lees were a charming couple, he very gay and she the daughter of a Scottish father and a Chinese mother. "See our children," she laughed, "they look as if they came straight from Scotland."

They did. They were sturdy little things with sandy hair, blue eyes and fair skins, and it gave me a distinct shock to hear them chattering away to each other in Mandarin.

"And now," said Mr. Fang, "a little rice spirit to whet the appetite." As we sipped it from tiny fragile glasses he turned to me. "You are coming back along the Highway?"

I looked at Joe and said I hoped so. "Ah, that is splendid! I will take you from here to Lashio in my German Horch car—my, what a car it is!—and my kid sister here will come along

too for I want her to travel and see life. That is what is wrong with our Chinese women, they don't travel enough. But is it not funny that I, a man of forty-nine, should have a kid sister of seventeen? My father married three times and his wives were very prolific. But tell me, how long are you staying in Kunming?"

"It depends how long I shall take to reach it," I began, and Joe howled in derision.

"She doesn't believe such a place exists," he explained.

"Only three days from here," insisted Mr. Fang cheerfully. (Oh, the incurable optimism of the Chinese!) "Well, all you need to do is to telegraph me the day before you start back and I shall be ready. Now let us talk about your country's policy in the Far East. What are your Government doing about the Tientsin incident, about Hong Kong defences, about Shanghai? Are they going to send a big fleet out here in their own interest and ours, or are they going to flirt with Japan? We do not like to think your country is our enemy, but lately her behaviour has been very queer indeed."

Horrid memories of the drum-fire of questions on these vexed subjects which had assailed my ears in Basra, Karachi, Calcutta and Rangoon leered at me, and I answered quickly I knew mighty little about the British Government's Far Eastern policy. "Besides," I added, "I would far rather learn about China than discuss international politics."

"So?" Mr. Fang cocked an eyebrow. "Well, have it your own way, but you won't be any better off because if you ask a Chinese to tell you of his land he immediately starts to talk politics."

"Like Russians do, I suppose?"

"Like every nation except the English," he corrected. "But it is discourteous to tease you. Let us talk instead of this temple which shows you how the spirit of modernity is quickening even in China. How old it is is not known, but records prove the priests lived in this very room three thousand years ago—yet only in the past twenty has it been possible to use it as an ordinary building. Deserted for centuries, there would have been a fierce outcry had an atheist set foot in it before, say, 1920. Tradition dies hard in China, superstition dies harder still."

I stared up at the high vaulted ceiling, the fine delicate curves

of the reddish stone, the exquisite tracery of carving. Around me the others spoke of the decline of Buddhism, but I thought of the temple as it must have been through the ages and saw the vast room peopled not by a group of intellectual, twentieth-century Chinese but by priests who squatted immobile on the smooth stone floor, their oblique eyes gazing at the dreaming city beyond the arched windows. Omnipotent they had been, those honey-skinned men in whose slim, talon-like fingers lay the destinies of the common folk huddled in the crowded streets beneath them, and when they had marched forth each dawn with their begging bowls there had been nothing cringing about their requests for alms, rather had they demanded arrogantly food which their flock sorely needed for themselves.

Mr. Fang shook my arm gently. "Afterwards I must show you the remains of an ancient still where the priests used to brew rice spirit, but now we must eat."

The priests vanished; the room regained its present appearance. But as I said to Mr. Fang, "Somehow I *knew* they made rice spirit," he smiled down at me as though he, too, had seen the squatting figures lording it over the walls of Pao Shan.

That first dinner at Pao Shan stands out in memory. The table was exquisitely polished, the bowls of finest egg-shell china, the boys deft and soft-footed, the innumerable dishes delicious, the chopsticks of ivory. Moonlight flooded through the high open windows and from the courtyard came the soft splash of a fountain, while round the table were nine or ten smiling Chinese faces. The feeling of any barrier between my hosts and myself disappeared entirely; indeed, I scolded myself for ever having thought I felt it—these people were my friends.

There was nothing immobile about their faces, nothing inscrutable about their minds. They had great intellect and they were also full of happiness; they spoke simply and openly about their country and their courtesy was perfect; they frankly admitted China's backwardness in many things and they discussed the war with a freedom which astonished me. Their planes were bad, they said, and while they had hopes that the new American factory near Musé, as well as Soviet Russia, would continue to send them an ever-increasing supply of good machines, they knew that the root of the trouble lay in the fact that the Chinese were rotten fliers. If the pilots did not crash

the plane taking off, they crashed it in landing, and it took a very long time indeed to train a Chinese to be anything like a useful aviator. Meantime the Japanese air-raids were causing an immense amount of damage.

"The people they kill," a man said slowly, "do not matter. Why worry over a few thousand lives when we have four hundred million Chinese? But when we erect new factories, universities, warehouses and they are bombed to bits, it is dreadful. We cannot afford to replace them."

"Well," said Mr. Fang decidedly, "I say we ought to exploit our hidden wealth, give foreign concessions for mining. Why, in Yunnan province alone there is enough gold to pay for the whole war."

He was the only Chinese I met who advocated the exploitation of China's vast mineral wealth, but while I admired him for doing so his countrymen were definitely distressed. The bare idea of digging riches from the earth, scoring the beautiful countryside with pits, was distasteful, and as for giving concessions to foreigners, look how in the past China had lost Hong Kong, Shanghai and other treaty ports?

Somebody mentioned the Generalissimo and immediately a chorus of praise came from every side. He had done magnificent work towards the regeneration of China, he fought without fear with his men, he was adored by his generals. I said suddenly, "And he has brought unity to China."

There was a long pause; then Mr. Lee bent forward. "How much unity is there in Europe?"

"None, at the moment. But then Europe is a continent inhabited by very different peoples."

"Yes, and China is bigger than Europe and the men from Peking as unlike the men from Canton as Germans are unlike Frenchmen. We always point these things out to Westerners who believe China to be unified. Sun Yat Sen did much towards an *ideal* of unity, Chiang Kai-shek is doing more; the translation of the ideal into the reality will take many, many years although Japan's aggression against us has helped. Perhaps it will never come, who knows?"

"But I have read and heard so much of China's unity?"

He laughed. "So have we but we know it is not true. Take this great province of Yunnan alone—and remember it is but

one among many. Until fairly recently the south-west of China was used very much as Tsarist Russia used Siberia; it was a lumping ground for political offenders, spies and criminals, consequently there is a very mixed population extremely difficult to handle. Then the war came and, owing to the Japanese advance and particularly their raids, it was necessary to remove not only vast numbers of people but also the centres of our economic life from the war zones. Where should we move them to? Why, to this fertile garden province where enough food could be grown for all, where the Highway formed a link between China and the West, where air-raids could then scarcely penetrate.

"Very well, the Central Government decided to use Yunnan not as a place of exile but as the very heart of China, and the Yunnanese were furious; indeed, they still are because Provincial Government is extremely powerful with us and Yunnan possesses a strong Governor who, like the peoples he rules, has no interest in the Central Government, in the development of the country, or in the war. Why, only this last spring the Generalissimo paid a personal visit to Yunnan asking for troops to be raised. The Yunnanese picked out their halt, maimed and blind, packed them off as their contribution to China's army and kept their sound men safely at home."

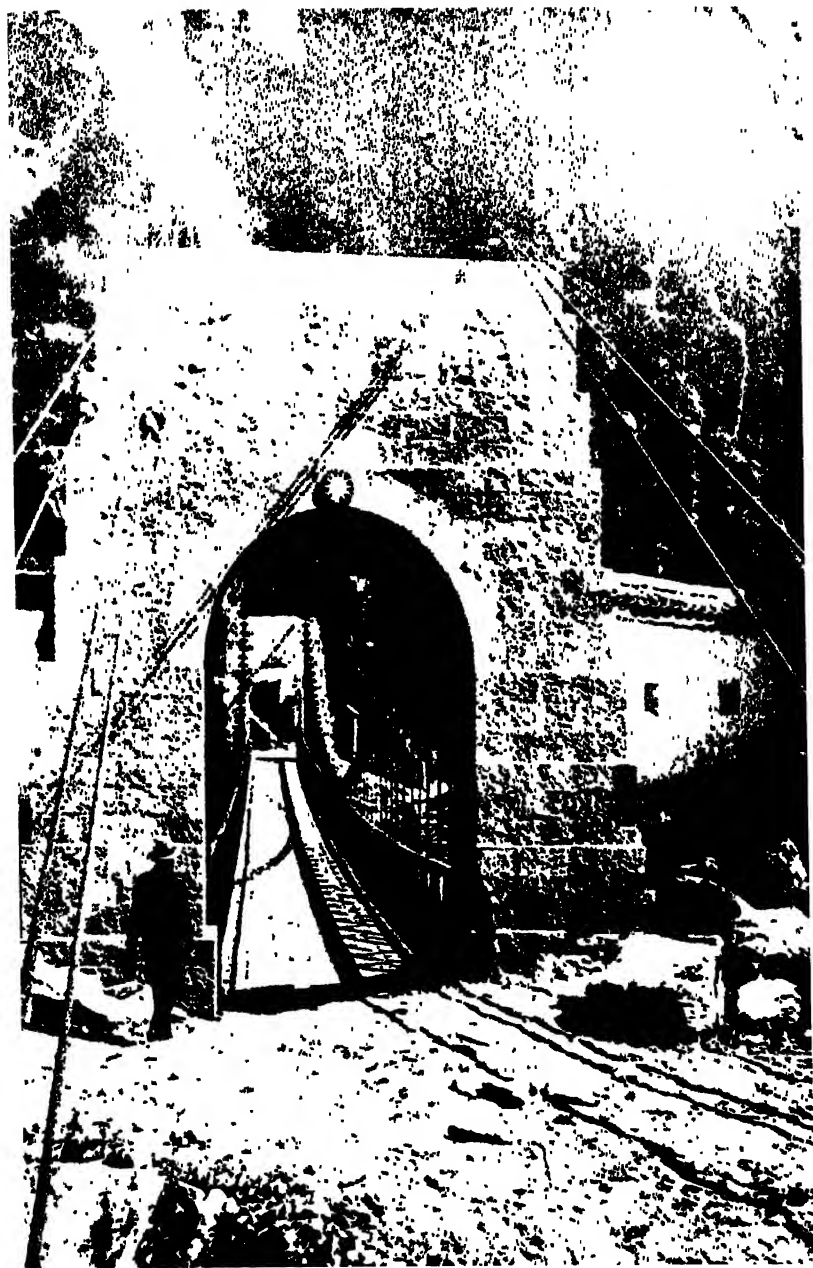
"But can't the Generalissimo bring them to heel in some way?"

Mr. Lee shook his head and his face grew sad. "How?" he asked simply. "If the Generalissimo punishes Yunnan, then Yunnan will not hesitate to rebel against him and the Central Government—and where will China's much vaunted unity be then? It would never do to let the outside world witness the deplorable spectacle of a Chinese province waging war against Chiang Kai-shek."

I realized too well what he meant, for since the focusing of world interest upon the Sino-Japanese conflict the cry had gone up in Europe and America—"See how marvellously Chiang Kai-shek has unified China!"

"Please understand," came Mr. Lee's soft voice, "that the Generalissimo has done miracles for China; that he cannot perform the final miracle of unity is not his fault in any degree. A god, not a man, is required for that gigantic task."

We wiped faces and hands on hot towels and went back to



other the gods stood menacing around Thunder. "This," said my companion, "is the time to visit the temples, when there is no sound, no hot sunshine, no sign of human life, because now you see the gods in better proportion, realize how they once dominated man."

I stared at Thunder, at his predatory golden claws, at his imperious golden face with its air of ineffable cruelty and shivered slightly. So easily it seemed that gigantic figure could advance swiftly from his niche in the wall, put his talons about our necks, raise us high in the air like dolls before dashing us to destruction down the steep stone stairs leading to the city.

"When were you born—the English month?" asked Mr. Fang, and when I told him May he answered that I came under the sign of the snake. "Very cunning, you should be," he jested, "very difficult for an enemy to defeat—but we no longer believe in such things."

I wasn't so sure. Probably the mass of the Chinese people still believed in these fearsome gods and their symbols; certainly I knew that if I stayed much longer in this ghostly place which belonged to an older world than any the West could reckon I should fall under its dominion. Crossing to the pillars which supported the high roof on the open side of the temple, I gazed down upon Pao Shan and saw that the four main streets which led to the centre of the city from the four gates formed a white cross in the moonlight—that cross was surely the strangest symbol to see from this temple where the threatening gods clustered close behind me?

Mr. Fang joined me, leaning against a pillar. "You like Pao Shan?"

"Yes, but it is much smaller than I imagined it would be." Then fearing he might think the remark a trifle derogatory I hurried on, "I have not really seen it yet, of course. Up to the moment I have been more interested in you and your friends. You are all so gay, so happy."

"You think so?" His voice was suddenly serious and he pointed to the city. "Pao Shan is so small, and within its walls over 350,000 people eke out some sort of miserable existence. They are bent and twisted with disease, they endure slow starvation, they are illiterate and they have no hope of better things. What do you think their lives must be like? When I hear my

fellow countrymen say they admire our old cities I see red! If I had my way I would raze Pao Shan, Kunning, Chengtu, Hangchow, Soochow, Hankow and many other towns to the ground—I should not wait for the Japanese to do some half-hearted bombing. These places are a rotten cancer eating out China's heart, barring her from future greatness and freedom." His arm fell as he turned to face me.

"And you think us happy?" he went on. "I will tell you something; not one of those men who laughed with you this evening has real cause for happiness. One of them has just lost his job—he has precious little chance of finding another. A second and a third have had to come to work here for a tenth their usual salary because they have been forced to flee from invaded cities. Others again have sons and brothers at the war or have lost touch with families who have most likely died from want or been massacred by the Japanese. All of us have private sorrows; all of us in different ways are struggling to help China. Do you wonder I want to take my kid sister to Burma, leave her there with friends? She is just a child, why should she have to suffer, have to watch the pitiful scenes in our streets, have to develop a stoical indifference to tragedy?"

He leaned back against his pillar again and held out a lacquer case. "I have not offered you a cigarette and I have talked too much," he said lightly. "My friends tell me I have been too long in the States; I spent seven years there, first at Harvard and then in California studying engineering and I am, I think, much more adaptable to foreign influence than are most of my race. At any rate, what I preached at you this evening is rank heresy to the average Chinese. Now we must go indoors or I shall have to confess my sins to my wife in Hong Kong and she will make me burn at least six candles."

I said, "And yet you call yourself 'all the fun in the world'?"

"Why not?" he mocked me. "It is true, up to a point."

Walking back over the smooth cobbles, I told him of the driver in Lungling who had advised me to seek the serenity of spirit which was China's secret.

"That was right. It is the secret which has upheld her through long centuries of strife. I, alas, am one of the very few Chinese who cannot press my face to the soil of my country and draw

from that contact a tiny fragment of her serenity. But what is this about you feeling ill?"

"I only had a slight attack of dysentery; it is better to-night."

He fussed over me like a hen with one chicken. "And yet you had pineapple at dinner and afterwards ate mangoes and oranges?"

"I was starving," I said snuffily, "and your food tasted uncommonly good."

But he was cantering on ahead of me. "I will fetch your coat and we will visit an opium den—that will cure you."

I stood helplessly in the middle of the passage, remembering the nausea which had attacked me in Lashio after one whiff of the drug. Besides, whoever heard of opium as a cure for dysentery? More than likely it would make me so much worse that I should be stranded in Pao Shan for weeks, but I could not be rude to "all the fun in the world". If I could only dig out Joe, who had entrenched himself somewhere to go through the guest-house books?

As I hesitated Mr. Fang trotted back. He had achieved Joe's long raincoat which, as I had previously discovered, trailed on the ground when I wore it. Tripping over the confounded thing, fumbling to rescue my fingers from its baggy sleeves, I followed my mentor down the literally thousands of steps leading to the barrack square.

"All right?" he called. "If you feel ill after the opium we will have a sedan chair to carry you home."

I scowled at his back. Of all the crazy notions, setting forth well after midnight to cure dysentery by opium-smoking in Pao Shan! Somehow we stumbled on to the square and trailed down the narrow street from the North gate, Joe's coat gathering mud and myself developing amazing agility in avoiding the pigs, goats, dogs and cattle which reposed in our path. "All the fun in the world" dived to the right down a filthy alleyway heaped with rotten vegetables, excreta and all the broken furniture ever thrown out by the Pao Shan citizens, and stopped before a lamp-lit doorway from which issued much talk and a smell slightly more evil than the one in the road. "A very high-class house," he whispered, and led the way within.

The atmosphere was nearly solid with smoke, but as my eyes grew accustomed to peering through the murk I saw about

forty sprawling figures on the benches turning round the walls. Some coughed, some moaned gently, some spat, some lay deep in dreaming, smiles flickering across their bony faces. A boy came and bowed low to Mr. Fang, who was clearly a person of importance, and was promptly ordered to produce a new pipe. "For if you smoke one already used by some diseased person you will probably contract another sickness," he informed me brightly, and indicated a space on the bench.

I had no fight left. Slumping on to the bench I thought dreadingly I should contract every illness known in tropical medicine before I was through with China.

"Lay your head on the wooden pillow."

Feeling uncomfortably like Mary, Queen of Scots, I did so and found an exceedingly nasty bare foot an inch from my nose, while when I stretched my own limbs along the bench I encountered a hard Chinese head which protested violently.

"Here is the pipe. The boy will kneel beside you and keep the pellet of drug in place, but you must draw in your breath *furiously*—like this, Aaaaah . . . Aaaaah. The pipe should really be smoked in one long inhalation but you are a novice."

I breathed as bidden, half-choked as I felt the sickly smoke trickling down my throat, tried again and was rewarded by an encouraging hand-clapping from Mr. Fang. "Splendid, splendid, you would be a good smoker with a little practice. Keep on, keep on!"

Torture had not yet ended. "Two more pipes at least you must have. Now the pupils of your eyes are dilating, that is fine!"

I thought it sadly disappointing and said so firmly after the second pipe. "I hate the taste of the stuff, I don't feel in the least different and I haven't even the ghost of a dream."

Mr. Fang giggled. "Forty pipes might bring you a dream, not two; but come along, smoke the third and complete your cure."

When I had finished, with a great deal of puffing and blowing, he told me to lie still for a quarter of an hour. Morosely I glared up at the lamp while he sat beside me and described the real effects of opium-smoking. "You Westerners treat opium as a sedative; we know it is one of the strongest stimulants in existence. Forty pipes a day is a modest allowance; most people

smoke between a hundred and thirty and a hundred and sixty, always at the same hour each day. Their dreams are wonderful but brief and thereafter their brains are astonishingly alert. The time to talk business with a Chinese is about an hour to an hour and a half after he has had his daily ration, he is at his most acute then."

"But surely heavy smoking results in physical deterioration?"

"Not commonly with Chinese, except that they suffer an inability to beget children, which is very disappointing to their wives." He then entered into certain medical details as to the effect of opium on sexual relationship which scarcely need to be given in this book and added judiciously, "You may stand up now. If you feel in the least dizzy I will call a chair."

Surprisingly I felt extraordinarily fit. My lassitude had gone, the pains which had gnawed my vitals for the past few days had disappeared, the bruises and bites gained in the bus ceased to worry me. Hugging Joe's coat about my middle I strode briskly up the hill, high-stepping over the sleeping live stock and arguing in the most intelligent manner about the situation in Middle Europe. Even those endless steps presented no difficulty; I skimmed up them like a bird and announced when I reached the courtyard I felt like writing all night.

"I should," said "all the fun in the world" gently, "you will write well."

So anxious was I to get to work that I barely thanked him for all his trouble but skimmed on up the stairs to my room. I typed until dawn, my brain functioning in rarely efficient manner, undressed and rolled myself in the Chinese quilt. Dreamlessly I slept until the boy awakened me with tea, informed me it was eleven o'clock and asked anxiously if I required "foreign food" for breakfast. Drinking my tea, I realized that Mr. Fang's strange medicine had proved effective—my dysentery had vanished.

II

"You are behaving very badly, Honourable Bigland," said Joe at the breakfast table. "You arrive in Pao Shan groaning that you are sick, you flirt outrageously in the moonlight with 'all the fun in the world', you indulge in an orgy in an opium den, you clack your damned typewriter the night through and insist upon stuffing yourself with food when we wish to take you on a shopping expedition in the city."

I made a face at him, told him that all Honourable Chows were descendants of the Mangshih pigs—and went on eating, my affection for temple-dwelling in Pao Shan growing with every mouthful. For here were no bowls of the hated liquid rice, no nasty slices of ancient egg floating in sour jelly, no horrid little bits of soya-steeped meat; here were crisp fried noodles, thin rashers of superb Yunnan ham, golden pancakes which melted in the mouth, juicy pineapples and lovely, lovely green tea.

Replete at last, I carried squat teapot and bowl out to the balcony, sat down on the warm stone seat and lit a cigarette.

"Do you realize it is twelve o'clock?"

"Go without me if you like; I'm blissfully content here."

No, that would not do, for apparently Mr. Liu and Joe were aching to show me the sights of Pao Shan. "The poor dormouse wants to see them too," added the latter artfully, "it is unfair to keep her waiting."

Apologizing for my discourtesy I gulped the remainder of my tea and we set forth.

"First we will visit the Yunnan-Burma Highway offices, introduce you to the director there and see how Ching is getting on with the repairs to the bus."

The street which had held only sleeping animals the previous night now swarmed with humanity. Women hobbled along the gutters on their tightly bound feet; children turned somersaults in the mud; water-carriers ran through the press shouting to the people to make way, their big kerosene tins dangling from the wooden yokes set about their necks; shopkeepers howled anathema at diffident customers from their stalls and booths; a group of boys pelted each other with rotten peaches; soldiers

strode by with their rifles slung at the usual incredible angles; dogs barked, chickens squawked, oxen lowed and goats baa'd.

Under the brilliant sun the scene held a thousand colours. A mound of mangoes shone golden, one of cabbages bright green; the people wore long blue coats and warm brown coolie hats; the children had shifts of gay cottons; the queer little shop windows glowed scarlet and purple with dyed cotton yarn; tiny girls ran among the crowds persuading them to buy bunches of waxy white gardenias, red gladioli, pink and yellow roses, lovely iridescent fish of unknown origin.

Every one yelled at the pitch of his or her voice and the noise was deafening, for it was market day in Pao Shan and trading was brisk. We bought a large tin of biscuits in a baker's, and six dozen mangoes from a stall, and three tins of "Ruby Queen" cigarettes and various other oddments, kind Mr. Liu doing my bargaining for me and popping the purchases into a vast string bag. We stopped at a shoemaker's where Joe produced the sodden pair he had worn since Lashio and demanded for them to be mended before nightfall, whereupon the aged proprietor threw up his hands and shrieked dramatically that if he worked his fingers to the bone he could not manage such a gargantuan task.

Joe argued; the aged man picked up an enormous hammer and threw it at his table with such force that the wood split; the three small boys who helped him with the cobbling shouted and spat; a crowd gathered and the fun was growing fast and furious when the aged one suddenly capitulated, held out his hand and seized the shoes.

"He wanted two dollars," translated Mr. Liu, "but Chow rightly beat him down to a dollar fifty. Ah, there is a funeral; would you like to watch it?"

An odd procession advanced towards us. In the van marched about a dozen men carrying long staves with crudely fashioned paper models atop them. "These represent all the things which the dead man owned in life," said Mr. Liu, "and they will be burned beside his burial-place so that they may follow him into the other world and he will not be without his earthly possessions. See, there is a motor-car; this man must have been wealthy."

I stared fascinated at the paper models, decorated in gaudy colours. Apparently the gentleman had owned a scarlet and

black motor-car of antique vintage, a black stallion, a host of pigs, a sedan chair and some oxen, not to mention a plethora of minor things including a Mandarin's robe and an indubitably English top-hat. Behind the stave-carriers came the gentleman himself, hunched up in a coffin several sizes too small for him, one claw-like hand clutched to his withered bosom, the other dangling horribly over the wooden box. Beside him walked his relatives, cheerful to all outward seeming, and behind them again came the professional wailers hired by the Chinese to mourn the dead. They were a tatterdemalion crew, presumably the unemployed of Pao Shan, and they emitted the most eerie and blood-curdling sounds as they passed.

"Just a little show," murmured Mr. Liu deprecatingly, and we moved on to the centre of the city, where the market stalls sprawled right across the street and no vehicle stood a chance of making any headway, so that rickshaws and ox-wagons formed a solid block over and under which the population climbed and crawled.

"Ah, I must send a telegram to my wife," said Joe, and I, remembering the Grand Hotel du *Luck*, asked him also to send one for me.

He waved a hand. "No need, absolutely no need. The Hotel du *Luck* always has vacant rooms." He vanished into the post office and emerged a few minutes later looking downcast. "All the wires are down between here and Hsiak'Wan."

"That is usual," said Mr. Liu simply; turning to me he added, "Sending telegrams in China is a difficult process."

I did not know then of the amount of National dollars I was to expend with the Chinese Telegraph Service and thought he was exaggerating. "What is Hsiak'Wan like?" I asked, for the Chinese seemed very proud of that city and mentioned it many times.

"Oh, a most important place; it is really the centre of commerce in Yunnan owing to its position. To it, you see, comes gold from Tibet, and there is a big export tea market there. If possible persuade Chow to take you to Talifu, what we call 'the Switzerland of China'. It is only about fifteen kilometres north of Hsiak'Wan and very, very beautiful."

But once again I was feeling like the Pied Piper as word of my curious appearance had flown round the streets and the large

crowds forsook their shopping to follow me. Holding on to the back of Mr. Liu's coat lest I lost him in the crush, I wriggled my way to the haven of the Yunnan-Burma offices, but before we reached there Joe gave a yelp. "Look, that man has a panda!"

We pushed and jostled through the crowd where it was thickest and found a dejected peasant holding an enormous chain, the other end of which was clamped about the middle of a furry black and white creature.

"We must buy it," decided Joe. "We will go halves in the price, Bigland, and think what a fortune we shall make!" He strode forward and spoke to the peasant. "There you are, only fifteen dollars! I tell you, it is a marvellous bargain."

I gazed doubtfully at the animal. It certainly bore a close resemblance to the panda in the London Zoo—but fifteen dollars? "I don't believe it is a real panda."

Joe snorted with rage. "There you are, arguing again, when you are face to face with the most astounding piece of good fortune! If you take him back to England or America we will make a thousand English pounds—think of that? Of course it is a real panda; the man has brought it down from Tibet."

Oblivious of our large and eager audience, we discussed the merits and demerits of that panda until our tongues ached. I finished by pointing out that Imperial Airways would not allow me to transport it home by flying-boat from Rangoon, that if I sent it by sea it would either die or involve me in heavy expenses for quarantine, and that if it ever did reach England the bottom would have fallen out of the panda market. Joe answered that I was a coward and a miser, and that if I would only produce seven dollars fifty he would sell the panda to the Kunming Zoo and hand me half the handsome profit.

"Yes? Who is going to look after it until we reach Kunming? We do not know what it eats and there is no room in the bus. And if the Zoo does not want to buy it, what then?"

"All right then," he shouted, "leave the bargain of a lifetime, I have no patience with you!" and marched away.

Behind me Mr. Liu said in a small voice, "It really is a panda."

My temper snapped. "I don't care what it is, come along."

But in the cool quietness of the Yunnan-Burma office Joe and I glanced at each other, ashamed. He said, "I am sorry, but it would have been so nice to buy it." I said, "And it was a real

panda." Without more ado we rose, bade a hurried good-bye to an astonished director and made for the door—we were going to buy that panda!

In the courtyard we met an anxious-faced Ching carrying a small grey monkey. He spoke at length to Joe, who interpreted that Ching had achieved two monkeys to take to friends in Kunming, that being brothers they fought, and that he would be endlessly grateful if I would keep this one for him until we left Pao Shan. I held out my hand impatiently for the monkey's chain: what was a little thing like a monkey beside a panda?

Out in the street I said to Joe, "It does not like being carried; I'm going to put it down and let it follow on the chain."

The monkey, alas, knew a trick worth two of that. It made a bound on to the head of an aged woman who screamed blue murder, it stole three mangoes off a stall, it darted on to a counter and embraced a terrified shopkeeper. Grimly I doled out compensation and tucked the creature firmly under my arm.

Pao Shan was thrilled. A European woman by herself was exciting enough; a European woman carrying a monkey was almost a miracle. Joe and I panted on, striving to ignore our followers, searching wildly for the peasant with the panda. Two hours did we scour Pao Shan, the hot sun beating on our backs, but our quarry had vanished into thin air. Depressed beyond measure, we crawled towards the North gate, and when Joe stopped to buy the monkey some nuts and bananas we met trouble, for the little beast wriggled free from my arms and leapt on to the tray of a false-teeth vendor. Single teeth, bits of copper wire, scraps of vulcanite strewed the ground, and while the children swarmed to pick them up the vendor gave an excellent imitation of apoplexy. Recovering somewhat, he harangued Joe, who translated that the man demanded fifty dollars for the loss of his valuable stock. "He says he provides the false teeth for all the nobility in Yunnan."

"He doesn't look as though he provided teeth for anything human. How much do I give him?"

"Oh, two dollars. His stock isn't lost; the children picked it all up for him."

I handed the vendor two notes. He was exceedingly angry.

"Come along," said Joe and marched on up the hill. I followed, the monkey perched on my head, and behind came the screaming

vendor hurling old and broken dentures at my back with much violence. "And if you had not eaten so much breakfast all this would never have happened," Joe grumbled.

"What has my breakfast to do with it?"

"We should have had more time to argue about the panda before we lost it."

We were climbing the steps in heavy silence when an amused voice said behind me, "Most honoured guest, have you lost your teeth?"

Turning, I saw "all the fun in the world" grinning at me and holding in his hand a twisted piece of vulcanite decorated with three yellow fangs.

IV

The monkey coloured the remainder of my stay in Pao Shan. I tied him to one of the courtyard pillars and he ate an oleander, three peaches and a fuchsia; I tied him up in my room and he ate a pair of bedroom slippers and a pyjama jacket; I tied him to one of the upper balcony pillars and he sat on the pagoda roof outside the Lee children's window and woke them up by pelting them with nuts. But he was a dear small animal. We taught him how to skin bananas, and the right way to eat mangoes, and he formed the habit of jumping up and wreathing skinny arms about my neck each time he saw me.

Our two days in the temple lengthened to three as the bus was in a state of collapse after its arduous journey, and Ching spent hours hanging around outside my bedroom door, wistful-eyed and wretched, for he hated inaction and, moreover, I surmised he had someone he cared for in Kunming. Through Joe I asked if he were married; but was told he did not approve of soldiers marrying in time of war. "He will go back to the Army when he can," explained Joe. "He is just having a little rest after Nanking."

Fancy calling driving over the Highway "a little rest"?

I tried to learn mahjongg from "all the fun in the world", and I played with the little Lees, and I listened avidly to tales of old China from the others; but always two things lured me, the temple of the zodiac, with its view over the city, and the crowded,

colourful bazaars, through which I wandered hour after hour, for here again beauty and horror dwelt side by side. Children of flower-like loveliness crowned with gardenia wreaths paddled in the filthy streams which whirled down the gutters. Beggars with festering sores leaned against ancient grey walls asraggle with bougainvillea. Slim delicate girls in glowing silk robes strolled up and down the streets offering their bodies for sale. Men so weak from starvation they could scarcely walk hawked bunches of gorgeous scarlet lilies.

Used as I was to overcrowded scenes in Russia, in India and elsewhere, I simply could not imagine how well over three hundred and fifty thousand humans packed themselves within the confines of Pao Shan. Even if they slept huddled in heaps on top of each other the thing seemed impossible, and I thought sombrely of what ghastly sufferings these Chinese must endure, for although the war had brought the beginnings of success to this city their methods of trading were backward yet and there was not nearly enough work to go round.

"Why do they not use more of this vast fertile plain for agriculture?" I asked Mr. Liu.

He shrugged his shoulders. "It is difficult. Transport is scarce and the people do not like moving far from the city."

Yet a peasant in the hills surrounding the Highway would break the mountainside into terraces and grow and tend his paddy there with the greatest diligence! Chinese town-dwellers were different; set them outside their city walls and they were lost, frightened, because all their lives had been passed within rigid bounds.

In the early morning and at sunset I returned to the temple of the zodiac, leaning my back against the warm golden stone and staring at the gods. Often there were worshippers; blue-trousered women with brown gnarled faces, pathetically young soldiers from the barracks, old emaciated men who squatted on the steps blinking rheumy eyes. They genuinely feared the gods, these folk, for terror sharpened their features as they bowed before Thunder and their hands scrabbled on the dusty ground as they proffered their little gifts of paper flowers, fruit or rice.

One time Miss Wei accompanied me to the main temple. Pottering about with joss-sticks was a tiny withered being, the keeper of the temple, and when he saw us enter he skipped around

glacefully showing us his different treasures. "He is very upset," said Miss Wei, "because Buddhism is gradually lessening its hold on the people. See the empty shrines from which the gods have been removed?"

Presently, however, she ran a finger along the table and found it thick with dust, so rated him noisily for his carelessness. "I told him the anger of Buddha would descend on him if he did not clean his temple better. Look at the cobwebs!" and she pounced upon a bunch dangling from Buddha's left foot.

The keeper chattered with rage, but eventually cowered before her volley of Cantonese. As we left him she sighed. "How can China rise when she is held back by so many lazy people? Always it is the same, but in a way one cannot blame them for what is their life but a handful of rice and endless toil?"

I looked out over the glittering pagoda roofs to the city lying so peacefully on the plain. "Yes," I repeated, "a handful of rice and endless toil."

But at the back of my mind I knew dimly the sentence was unfinished.

V

In the dining-room the men were talking excitedly. "Just fancy," called "all the fun in the world", "we have a highly important visitor arriving to-night. He is a Westerner, a famous engineer, and he comes to teach us how to burn charcoal in our motors and thus save the petrol. I shall try it in my Horch," he went on decidedly, "and when you return you will be amazed at the speed with which you will be whirled to Lashio!"

Thought of speeding over the Highway was unpleasant, but I was interested in the charcoal problem, especially as I knew what difficulties the Chinese had in acquiring sufficient petrol for their needs. "What nationality is this engineer?"

"How should we know? That does not matter—it is his wonderful knowledge which counts. We have sent out to the forests for all the available charcoal."

The constant credulity of an intellectual race had begun to irritate me. "Is the engineer going to give you a practical demonstration? Will he arrive in a charcoal-driven lorry?"

They groaned and called me a defeatist. Didn't I understand . . . ? Pa-t-i-ti, pa-t-i-ta.

I unearthed the knowledge during chow that the engineer was travelling from Burma in a fleet of petrol-driven lorries provided by a grateful Chinese company, and wandered off to do a little more exploration of Pao Shan. Walking into the Yunnan-Burma offices about four o'clock in search of a bowl of tea I met Joe, who greeted me lugubriously. "The bus is ready."

"Good, I hope they have mended the ventilators and got the windows to work. I suppose we leave at dawn?"

"We shall never leave," his voice was hollow. "The official who has to sign our departure permit refuses to do so until the rest of our convoy arrive. How *can* they arrive when most of the trucks are stuck or smashed up somewhere between here and Che'fann?"

This was desperate. Clutching the monkey I sought Ching, pointed to the rejuvenated bus, and went through a complicated pantomime of how he would drive the vehicle to the East gate.

He beamed and pointed to the monkey. "Moonkey, *fan*."¹

"No, *not* rice for the monkey. Bus to Kunming." Once again I went through my pantomime but Ching, who had understood my queer requests so easily on the Highway, was deaf, dumb and blind in Pao Shan.

Presently he rushed off to fetch Joe, who said morosely, "Why worry about rice for the monkey when we are in such a pitiable state? There is my poor wife in Kunming, I promised her I should be home last week and doubtless she imagines me dying of fever in Mangshih."

"I never mentioned rice or monkey. I was trying to make Ching understand we could sneak out of here at dawn, permit or no permit."

He stared at me in consternation. "But you must not do such things! He would be arrested if he disobeyed orders. Listen, you have a letter to A——? Take it this afternoon and tell him you are an honoured guest and must reach Kunming as soon as possible. And leave the monkey here; you do not look grand with a monkey."

¹ *Fan*, pronounced fā, meaning rice.

"The letter is in my case and I'm not going to trail home for it. Where is the official who issues the permits?"

Joe looked terrified. "You must not interview him; he is very important."

"Moonkey," beamed Ching. "*Fan*."

Exasperated, I picked up the monkey and turned my back on the silly pair. Digging "all the fun in the world" out of his office, I explained the situation. That rebel grinned. "The Chinese love bureaucracy. Come along, we'll go to see this official."

He was small, stout and very pompous. He sat behind an enormous desk sipping green tea and said, "Most foreigners I do not like. Germany is my friend."

"Mine too," I retorted mendaciously, and "all the fun in the world" spun him an astonishing story of how I was *persona grata* with the Third Reich while I tried to look *hochgeboren* and restrain the monkey from drinking the tea at the same time. The lies we told the little man were incredible, and I believe he ended up with the vague idea I was a member of the *Gestapo*, but he issued the permit. "And the moonkey," he added heavily, "he also returns to Berlin?"

"Oh, yes," I assured him earnestly, and we fled back to Joe, who quite cheered up at our news.

"What about food for to-morrow?" I asked.

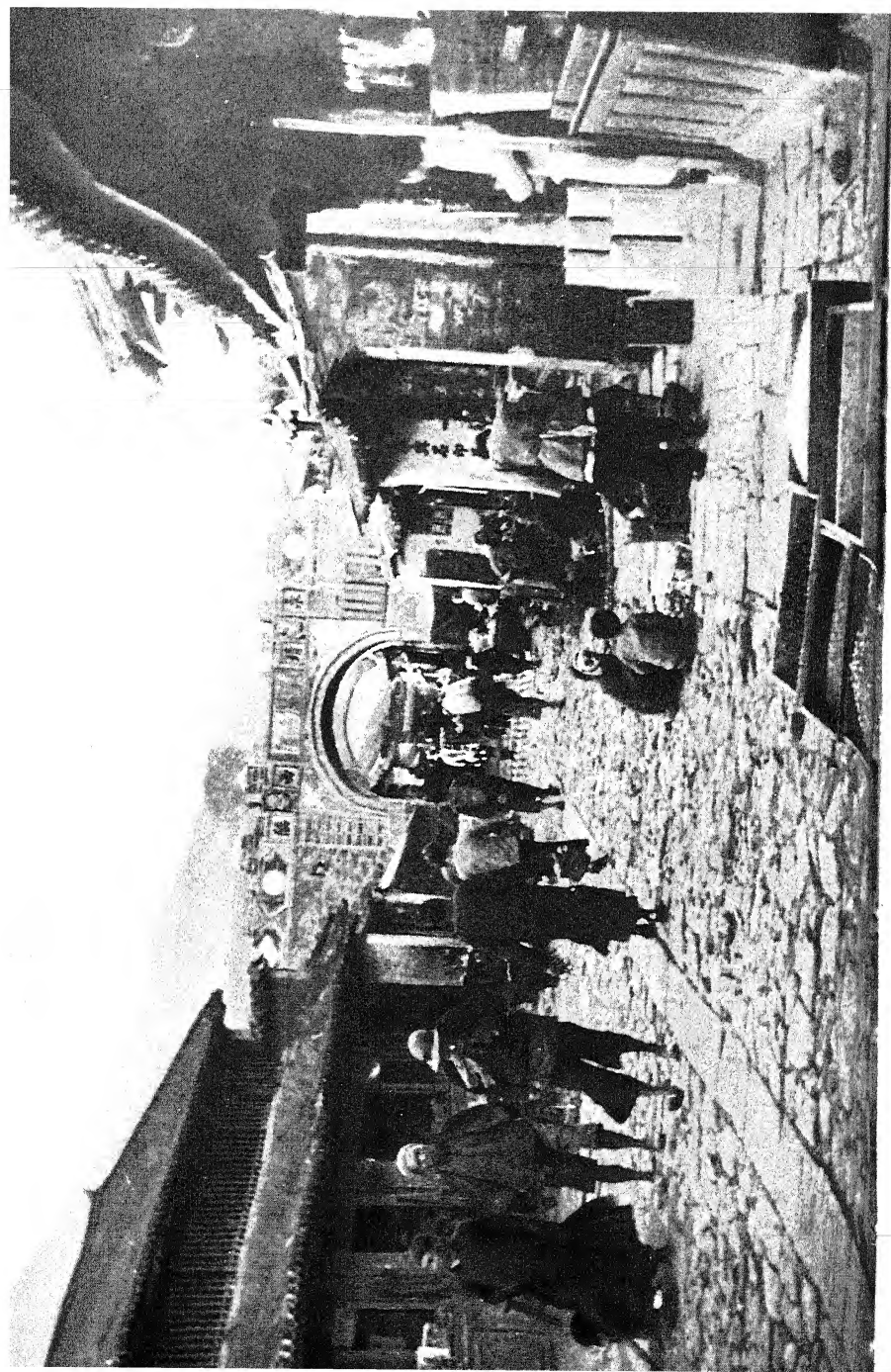
"No need. There are guest-houses all the way now, we shall have midday chow at Yungping and reach Hsiak'Wan before nightfall."

We pranced up the hill to the temple in light-hearted mood, having arranged with Ching to call for us at 5 a.m. on the morrow. Kunming was actually taking on some semblance of reality in my mind.

"I wonder," said "all the fun in the world" eagerly, "if our engineer has arrived?"

Dusk dimmed the courtyard. He and Joe walked towards the dining-room but I, uninterested in the engineer, ran upstairs and cannoned into a soft body with such violence that the monkey sprang from my grasp and clawed on to the dark mass ahead of me, screaming with fear.

"God Almighty!" boomed a Scots voice, "what the hell's yon?"



I was so shocked that I was momentarily paralyzed. The boom went on, "Tak' your muckle paws off me, whatever you are!"

I regained my senses. "I am so sorry, it is only a monkey."

"God Almighty," said the voice again, "and who might you be, speaking decent English in a benighted place like this?"

"Oh, just a traveller."

"Ye must be a mental case if you think you can sell anything to the Chinks unless ye're travelling in spittoons? Man alive, what a god-forsaken country! D've know, it's taken me ten whole days of bumping and racketing to reach here from the Burmese border, and they gave me a tent that let the water in too."

"You must be the engineer who knows all about charcoal-burning for lorries?"

"Aye, I am that—and I'll tell you a secret, lassie. I'm selling the Chinks the apparatus but they haven'a a hope in hell of burning charcoal with it. That's what ye want to be with these yellow men—gey foxy."

Fury boiled in me. Snatching the monkey I ran along the passage to my room and banged the door behind me.

When I descended for dinner the Scot, who was very large and portly, was the centre of an admiring group and was talking not about charcoal but about the state of Europe. Between gulps of rice spirit he assured his audience that the Soviet Russians were a race of murderers, that he was a personal friend of the Führer, and that Britons never would be slaves. Catching sight of me, he waved his glass. "Yon's the lassie wha sells spittoons and carts a damn great beastie along wi' her!"

The Chinese regarded him in polite amazement and explained exactly who I was. I fixed him with a glassy eye; he was already very drunk but it had effect. He mumbled an apology and swayed across to the dining-table under the friendly guidance of Mr. Lee. Before I went to my own place I bent over him and said, "For pity's sake don't drink any more of that rice spirit. It's pure fire-water."

That did it. While we all ate he harangued me on the average Scotsman's capacity for strong liquor. "And me as used to whisky as to my mother's milk! I'm telling you, lassie, I never got boozed but once and that was at the Mercat Cross in Edinburgh on a New Year's Eve."

It was an uncomfortable meal. The Chinese were trying to pretend that a drunk Scot was a thing familiar; I was trying to pretend he didn't exist; he was determined to show us all what a fine fellow he was, and I blushed for very shame when he bawled at the boys he couldn't use "bloody chopsticks" and alluded to my dear Mr. Wang as a "Chink I met in Lashio".

Towards the end of dinner he glared across at me. "Ye're madder nor I thought you were, coming over that awful road just to write a bit of a book. How many lorries did you bring?"

"None. The Chinese Government kindly allowed me to travel in one of their new buses as their guest."

"Man alive!" An expression of horror stole over his face. "It's a marvel ye weren'a murdered!"

Climax came when we were again grouped about the stove, for the engineer deliberately ignored my warnings about rice spirit and was suddenly and hideously ill. Unable to bear the sounds of him being helped up to bed by Joe and three of the boys, I fled to the temple of the zodiac, followed by "all the fun in the world". "What is wrong?"

"Everything!" I answered passionately, "that appalling man with his rudeness, his drunkenness, his sickness. What must you all think of my countrymen after that display?"

"No, no," his voice was soothing. "We do not mind. It is just that he did not realize how strong our liquor was. As for his speech, well, our skins *are* yellow, you know."

But I refused to be comforted. The innate courtesy of the Chinese prevented them from telling me, but what must they really think of that boor now sprawling on his bed? They met so few foreigners, they were bound to regard this one as typical of his race. Remembering the kindnesses, the innumerable acts of goodness the Chinese had showered upon myself, I felt hot with shame at thought of this man's behaviour.

"Cheer up," said "all the fun in the world", "you are leaving in the morning."

I forgot about my enemy. The Highway tugged me one way, Pao Shan another. Looking out at loveliness dreaming in the moonlight, I wondered why I did not stay here for ever and a day, but the next moment I thought of the red ribbon of road winding eastwards through the rosy hills and knew I had to follow it to its end.

The boys had laid my clean clothes on the bed and rolled my dried bedding neatly together. On my dressing-table was a little bill at which I blinked. The total, including my room, my meals, my washing and tips to the baggage coolies, was only eleven dollars fifty!

Next morning I awakened to a thunderous knocking on my door, which opened to admit Ching's head. "Kunming," he said.

Perhaps owing to their activities with the Scot, Joe, the manager and the boys had all overslept, so we scuttled round frantically, telling each other that the permit official might regret his generosity at any moment and that the sooner we left Pao Shan the better.

"But I demand my breakfast first," announced the dormouse, so we stopped and demolished a large meal for which we were thankful later on.

Heaving the last of the baggage into the bus, I said to Joe, "By the way, how are the sick men?"

"Five dead," he replied airily.

Three minutes later we were bumping towards the East gate, the two monkey brothers quarrelling furiously, Mr. Miao gabbling information about our route. "Yungping is an agricultural town with a population of 44,403 people, chief crops being rice, beans and corn, imports are cloth, tea, sugar, matches and salt, exports are animal hides and beans, fifty miles beyond the town the road descends into the plain to Yangpih, an agricultural town of 28,091 people. . . ."

I turned to Joe. "So there are only four little nigger boys now?"

"They would be better dead."

"Yes," I answered. "A handful of rice and endless toil."

"And all the philosophy of China," added Joe softly.

Chapter Eight

BEGGARS IN HSIK'WAN

I

"TO-NIGHT, Hsiak'Wan, to-morrow Chu'Hsiung, day after to-morrow Kunming," chanted Joe as we purred across the plain in the sparkling morning light. Mr. Miao grunted approval, Ching grinned and the dormouse made the effort to sit upright, say "Kunming!" in a rapt voice and give a tinkling laugh before she settled down to slumber.

I alone was in melancholy mood (maybe the opium was having its reaction?). It was all very well for Joe to crow that two more nights on the road were all we should pass before we slept in Kunming, but the Highway simply did not treat its travellers that way. I remembered the long halts in the rain, the dirty goitrous Shans, the butcher's shop in Lungling, the pigs of Mangshih, the groans of the little nigger boys—all the unpleasant side of our journey did I remember, including the ghastly story told me by the first surveyor who had died which I was always trying to shove far back into my mind.

"They didn't make much of a job repairing the bus," I remarked sourly.

Miao waxed wrathful. "Excellent bus, strongly built, good condition."

I scowled at him. He was a stupid little man, so silly that it seemed no manner of use pointing out that the ventilators had not been touched, that the windows still refused to function, and that the mud had not even been cleaned from seats and floor. All of a sudden I felt completely Western and longed to shake all Chinese. Just over a fortnight ago this had been a new bus; now it was literally falling to pieces, and although I had a shrewd suspicion it had not been fashioned of sound material to start off with, the fact remained that nobody had really attempted to service it, principally owing to the credulity of its owners, who swallowed the glib tales of Westerners, hook, line and

sinker. The Western agent told the Chinese a bus or a truck would stand up to anything; they took him literally, asked no further information, put the vehicle on the Highway and scratched their heads when anything untoward happened to it. Consequently, out of our own convoy of thirty, as example, perhaps ten had reached their destinations without serious mishap. The Scot and his charcoal-burning scheme was another case in point. Nobody had studied the blue-prints of his apparatus beforehand; upon the receipt of his suggestion lorries had whirled him, doubtless at quite a lot of expense, to Pao Shan and half the South-Western Transportation Company's employees had been sent out to scour the forests for charcoal.

Bluntly, the Chinese were adepts at buying pups, and I grinned as I remembered the story of a French friend who visited a general, hoping to sell him steel helmets for his troops. They were excellent helmets, but after a good hour of demonstrating their strength the general asked an orderly to bring in one of the helmets then in use. My friend took this, banged it against the corner of the table and showed the general the huge dent which had appeared, explaining the uselessness of such cheap articles. The general looked astonished. "But what does it matter when we have so many soldiers?"

Miau had fallen asleep, Joe was busily studying some papers, my depression deepened as I developed a theory that Pao Shan opium had not cured my ailments but merely transferred them from my body to my brain, and as we took to the hills I shivered for they meant just one thing this morning—rain. Up we spiralled into dark-red gorges, and before we had climbed a thousand feet down came a torrential shower blotting out view of the plain behind us, view of the mountains ahead which had looked so lovely from the temple balcony. I lay full length on the seat, propped my head on my pillow and went to sleep.

But not for long. My window was one of those which refused to shut and I awakened an hour later soaked to the skin. Hearing my muttered curses, Miau craned his neck at me like an inquisitive bird. "Damp air most refreshing?"

I sniffed, Joe laughed, the dormouse wailed she had lost a shoe, an event which occurred each time she woke up. Searching for it round the heaving, lurching bus increased my ill-temper

so much that when Miao asked for the loan of my nail-file I refused the request point-blank.

"But my nails require it and you have lent it before?"

Being in no mood for logic, I said "damn!" and scrabbled in the Shan bag.

"Englishwomen swear, Chinese women never swear," he remarked reprovingly.

Almost I stuck the nail-file into his tightly buttoned little body, but at that moment Joe announced wistfully he was feeling very hungry. "And the road surface is not so good as I expected; I doubt if we shall reach Yungping by noon."

A delicious sense of virtue stole over me as I reached for the box of biscuits I had bought in Pao Shan. Doubtless it was nasty of me, but I did enjoy getting the better of Joe occasionally and, after all, he had been so emphatic that we should eat midday chow at Yungping. "Here you are, open it with your penknife, please."

The box was covered in gaudy red and silver paper. Underneath the paper was rough tinfoil. Underneath the tinfoil was a sliding wooden top which wouldn't slide. By the time Joe had split both thumb-nails and bent the penknife we were literally starving. In the end he seized the hammer (the only tool Ching seemed to possess in the tool-bag) and levered the top off. We crowded round him expectantly and each seized a crumby biscuit. A moment later expectorations resounded on all sides for the taste was indescribable, a mixture of castor oil, liquorice, salt fish and hair grease being the nearest definition of it we could determine. Silently Joe replaced the lid and handed me the box with a courtly bow.

When he had partially recovered he said weakly, "Most honourable Bigland, I have read of the Borgias who poisoned their guests at dinner. Can it be you are a descendant of their family?"

I was about to argue indignantly that anyway the biscuits were the produce of Yunnan province, when we whisked round a sharp corner, pulled up with a jerk and began to perform curious see-sawing movements—we had met just another small landslide, about a ton of good red earth atop which several coolies stooped above their spades staring vacantly at the ground. They did not appear to be the least interested in their task, so

Joe and I descended and stalked towards them, only to find ourselves knee-deep in mud so thick we could not stir either forward or back until a coolie slightly less apathetic than his brethren levered us out of our surroundings with his spade. "He says," interpreted Joe, "that there are continual falls of earth over this patch of road. He says also they cannot work well because they have had no food for three days."

I stopped scraping the mud from my legs—a brilliant thought had struck me. Picking my way back to the bus, I snatched the awful box of biscuits and thrust it into the coolies' hands.

The effect was miraculous. About two pounds of biscuits between a dozen men did not go far, but they were devoured with grunts of pleasure, and thereafter the gang set to work with such energy that cascades of mud splashed over the precipice hiding Mikiang gorge and shaggy bark-cloth capes whirled around their owners' shoulders. Watching the scene, the whole tragedy of China smote me again. How much had a man to suffer before his world brightened with the swallowing of a few horrible lumps of dough?

Joe nudged me. "The coolie is offering you your box back, but he says if by chance you do not require it may he keep it so that he may make a little fire to-night?"

We left him clutching this treasure to his skinny chest, a look of beatific contentment on his yellow face.

II

The sun shone out once more as we swept downhill towards Mikiang, curving along the side of its deep wooded gorge, gazing at its rose-red waters. Salween held my heart but Mikiang was intensely beautiful as it swirled southwards tossing huge plumes of pinkish spray over the towering jungle trees, and I was glad Ching had to drive very slowly owing to the bad surface.

Poking my head far out of the window I exclaimed to Joe on the amazing colour of this river, but he replied precisely that its rosiness was merely due to the red mud of its bed churned up by the stream's swift passage, so I made a face at him. I refused to analyze Mikiang's loveliness; that way in China danger lay

for always the root cause of beauty proved either dull or revolting; but as we neared the suspension bridge and Miao began to show signs of reciting his usual reams of statistics I poked the dormouse awake grimly and with malice. At least she should view one of the seven wonders of the Highway, and between our lyrical remarks the small surveyor would have no chance of doing his guide-book act.

She wasn't pleased. She stared straight ahead, said, "What an ugly bridge," took out her writing materials and bent above them.

Fortunately this so shattered Miao that he remained silent with his mouth wide open for the next half-hour while I revelled in the sight of the wide, iridescent river flowing between green and flowering trees. Rose, emerald, ruby, violet, flame and gold, the colours dazzled one, swept one into a glittering kaleidoscope, left one breathless and protesting such glory was incredible. Had it ever rained in Yunnan province? Had the twelve little nigger boys and the Lungling butcher ever existed? Ching turned his head, pointed towards the river gorge and smiled. He, like myself, swung from hell to heaven with every change of China's mood, and I could not even feel indignant with the dormouse when she lifted her head from her writing and announced placidly she had told some friend in Rangoon all about our Highway journey.

"And of course you described Mikiang?"

"Ah, no," she replied lightly. "A river is scarcely interesting. I told her of the noodle chow in Hsinwi and the Mangshih pigs."

It was half-past three when we jolted into Yungping and Joe said ecstatically, "Wait until you see our guest-house manager here. He is the handsomest man in all China."

We stopped outside a flat, featureless building and the ugliest creature I had ever seen popped out of the door like a jack-in-the-box. His black hair grew straight up from his round head, his eyes were like tiny black beads and his face resembled a suet pudding. "Welcome!" he mouthed, and we clambered out stupidly and followed him into a small bare room, in which sat a wrinkled little Chinese woman, her hands folded in her lap. She bowed and smiled, but as I moved forward into the light and full realization of my appearance dawned on her, she gave a sharp scream and pointed at me. "Oo-aa-ee-oo-oo?"

"English," I said and bowed politely.

She started all over again, seized my arm and dragged me on to a hard chair beside her. "Oo-aa-ee-oo-oo-aa-oo. . . .?"

Miss Wei came to my rescue. "She says you are a foreign devil and will you please not cast a spell upon her because she has a son suddenly dead and she journeys with us to Kunming to bury him."

I patted the wrinkled hand, all I could do to show my sympathy, but from that moment until we reached Kunming the woman simply could not realize I did not understand her language and tried pathetically to tell me her troubles at every possible moment.

In the meantime we were wet, starving and plastered in mud. Joe had disappeared so I asked the manager if I might wash.

"Welcome!" he bowed.

I stood irresolute. "And is there a toilet?"

"Welcome!"

I pointed to a door leading out into a yard. "This way?"

"Welcome!"

Only then did Miss Wei giggle, "That is his one word of English."

Eventually we found a foetid lavatory separated by a partition from an equally foetid kitchen, and on our return to the room the boy brought a bowl of hot water and invited me to stand in it while he washed the mud off my legs, but of food there was no sign. Desperately I whispered to the dormouse, "Ask him if we are going to have any chow."

She did so, in Cantonese. He replied: "Welcome!"

We relapsed on to the hard chairs and waited for Joe and Miao, who appeared quite a while later obviously a little jolly on rice spirit.

"No food?" they demanded.

We got our own back. We chorused: "Welcome!"

Thereafter I felt sorry for the manager, for Joe rated him up hill and down dale, translating for my benefit as he went. Surely he knew that guests were *always* expected in a guest-house? Hadn't he received strict instructions before being appointed to his valued post that all travellers were to be fed, bathed and otherwise tended? Didn't he understand how he was letting the whole of China Travel Service down by his behaviour?

The manager's answer was to canter out into the yard and wring a scrawny fowl's neck. An egg dropped from the latter end of the bird and he caught it dexterously in his hand and held it up to us after the manner of a conjurer. "Welcome!" he said to me.

It was too much. Joe and I took an attack of the giggles from which we did not recover until the scrawny fowl, hacked into a hundred hastily fried pieces, appeared on the table. Beside it was the egg in the form of an omelette.

We ate voraciously, despite the toughness of the chicken and the hardness of the husky rice. The wrinkled woman refused to eat with us, so we filled her bowl and she retired to the now rain-swept courtyard, there to indulge in the most appalling series of belches. Joe said, "There is a sick man to be taken to Kuuming. He says he must die at home with his wife and child beside him."

I dropped my soup-spoon. "Not *another* sick man?"

"There are more sick than healthy in China to-day," he reminded me, and I felt ashamed. All the same the wrinkled woman with the dead son and a thirteenth little nigger boy wouldn't be cheerful travelling companions.

"What is he suffering from?"

"Malignant malaria, and the doctor here has no injections left. He has had two but they have not worked sufficiently."

I pushed back my chair and stared at the dripping courtyard. Here we were again, delirium in six hours and paralysis in twelve; sweat and stench and vomiting; groans and struggles and sterterous breathing.

The dormouse laid her small hand on mine. "You worry too much over sickness, Most Honourable Bigland; we do not worry so in China."

I answered slowly, "Most Honourable Shan Ling Ngai, I believe that everywhere in the world people should worry over sickness which creeps like a plague across a country. It is terrible to allow human beings to suffer like that."

"I do not agree," interrupted Mr. Miao. "Only through suffering does a man grow strong; that is a man's mind, what does his body matter?"

Joe beamed at me. "Unorthodox, are we not?" he teased gently.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. "Shall we reach Hsiac'Wan to-night?"

"Yes, yes, but we had better be going now."

I walked out of the guest-house and yelped as I stuck my right foot into clammy mud. The boy had taken my shoes to dry them.

"Absent-minded," reproved Joe, and told the manager to fetch them. He brought them at the double and insisted upon putting them on for me. "Welcome!" he bowed, "Welcome!"

III

The sick man was lying on the back seat and as I bent above him he murmured, "Sorry, so very sorry." He was an engineer who had been working on the new Mikiang bridge and obviously a most cultured person, although after the usual Chinese fashion he informed me solemnly in English he must reach his home in Kunming that he might die there.

I suggested mildly that he might yet live in Kunming, but he shook his head, so I put some cooling lotion on his temples, thanked heaven there was only one of him and sought my own corner to find the wrinkled woman comfortably installed there with my pillow. "Oo-aa-ee-oo?" she began.

Ruthlessly I signalled to Ching and he lifted her bodily and dumped her down on another seat minus the pillow, whereupon she started to weep and I felt a brute. Just then a lot of noise came from outside and a Corporal dashed up, demanding to know if he also could journey to Kunming.

"Tell him 'no', shrilled the dormouse. "None of us can sleep in such a crowd!"

I glanced hopefully towards Joe. My Mikiang exhilaration had departed abruptly, but if I could indulge in a sound sleep I felt it might have a chance of returning.

Joe was adamant. This was the first passenger bus over the Highway and it was our duty to aid would-be travellers, so that the Corporal barged in, lugging two huge kitbags which he dumped on my feet. He was a pleasant, swaggering youth with an infectious grin but he took up a mighty lot of room.

We drove off with Miao nudging my elbow, "Cloth. tea,

sugar, matches and salt," he chanted, "animal hides and beans, agricultural town with a population of 44,403 people."

Rudely I buried my face in my pillow and tried to sleep, but the Corporal's bags kept hitting my knees, and the monkeys, now shut in the baggage compartment, fought so hard that Ching had to stop and carry them into our part of the bus, where they scuttered madly over us all, and the rain teemed through the windows that wouldn't shut.

We climbed and we climbed; we bumped and we bumped; the mosquitoes of Yungping attacked us in droves; we stopped, went on, stopped again. "Beautiful mountain scenery here," said Miao briskly, and the Corporal began to play a cross between a piccolo and a flute in order to cheer our flagging spirits.

He did not cheer mine. The afternoon seemed endless and I wallowed in a bottomless pit of despair. "How far is it to Yangpih?" I asked Joe faintly, and he answered, "Oh, about fifty kilometres."

Then the dark came down and Ching ground along in first. Then the batteries failed and Joe and I had a violent row because I had forgotten to put a fresh battery in my torch in Pao Shan. We groped for the precious nail-file and handed it at last to Ching, who tinkered with it hopefully, and Miao said virtuously that if I could lend it for the purpose of mending a battery I could surely lend it for the purpose for which it was originally intended.

A feeble glimmer of light restored, we pounded forward once more, but our progress grew ever slower for the road here was in a dreadful state and from a deep gorge on our right came the roar of an angry river.

"One more bump like that and we shall be in it," remarked Joe, as I rose up to hit the ceiling and descended again with a thud.

I didn't answer; I couldn't. I was bruised all over, numbed with the cold, completely wretched.

The rain fell, the wind blew, the bereaved woman wailed, the noise of the river became a thunderous menace and every minute I thought I should be hurled through the window into the jaws of its canyon. With praiseworthy intent Joe endeavoured to rouse me by retailing the contents of some news sheet he had read in Pao Shan.

"There was a—how d'you call it?—a document describing Germany's plans for the conquest of Europe. It was written by a German and it said that before three months were out the Third Reich would have captured England, and that Marshal Goering would broadcast this fact from Westminster—that is where your Parliament meets, is it not?"

I said, "Hitler may march through London for all I care," and at the moment I meant that fragrant heresy. Nothing mattered to me except this relentless road which clung obstinately to our minds, our bodies, our very bones. The Highway had got me; Kunning was again a mirage on a far horizon, my world this cumbersome bus which jolted endlessly over deep ruts.

A long time afterwards Joe roused me from my torpor. "It is now ten p.m. We are now descending into the plain. By ten thirty we shall be in Yangpih."

"Ohé," yawned the dormouse, "I hope there is a bed?"

Nobody could answer that one with any degree of truth so the Corporal played us another tune on his flute-cum-piccolo and I clutched the window frame for we seemed to be sliding perilously into the very mouth of hell. "D'you think," I asked vaguely, "the villagers will have any Indian corn?"

At that moment the bus stopped and I peered out into the black night. "Where is Yangpih?"

"It isn't," replied Joe simply, "we have a puncture."

We both giggled and felt better. There was something satisfyingly normal about a puncture and as we crawled and clattered on another few miles we blithely discussed the possibilities of lodgings in Yangpih. "And it has stopped raining," said Joe pridefully, "is not that a good omen?"

I agreed effusively, for just then we stopped once more and in the fitful light of a watery moon I discerned a cluster of houses some distance from the road. "Come along," Miau beckoned us, "we shall beg for a night's shelter."

We stumbled along an exceedingly muddy pathway to the houses. Not a light showed in any of them, but hopefully we went the round of the doors, the only response to our continued knockings being grunts and groans. Very evidently the Yangpih inhabitants enjoyed their nightly rest, because even when Joe and I flung our full weight against the end door our assault had

no effect for quite five minutes. Then a shutter banged above our heads and a furious voice shrieked at us. Joe shrieked back, the dormouse contributed a volley of Cantonese, Miao and the Corporal acted as sort of Greek chorus in Pekin Noir; but after the clamour had continued for some quarter of an hour the shutter banged again. "He says," panted Joe, "that we are bandits and nothing would induce him or any of the other people to open their doors to us."

We stood dejectedly in the mud, wondering what to do next, and a sudden strong wind blew our sodden garments against our bodies.

"I will explain," said Miao, "that Chow and I are Government officials, that you are an honoured guest of the Government and that Miss Wei is a teacher in an overseas Government school, and will beg them at least to throw us down some supper."

It seemed a bright idea but unfortunately not all the mentions of Government moved Yangpih, for a series of angry voices informed us we might starve for all it cared.

"I know!" Joe tugged my arm. "There is a Buddhist temple here. The priests will help us."

We floundered about for half an hour before we found the temple—or rather its remains for it was roofless and over its doorstep grew tall grasses; but adjacent to it was a kind of lean-to shed of bamboo and from this emerged a strange figure with a lantern. Squat it was, its rotundity covered in a rich silken robe, and in odd contrast to its stoutness the head atop it was withered like those of the mummified victims of the Borneo head-hunters, the parchment skin stretched taut over the high cheekbones. Thin lips opened and spoke to Joe, who answered at length, and then the apparition turned to me and said in perfect English, "All my long life have I wished to entertain English lady. Please enter my poor house."

I wanted to say that a wind-swept night in Yangpih seemed a queer setting for the fulfilment of his wish, but all my energies were taken up in trying to enter the priestly dwelling since I had to do so on all fours down a mud tunnel, remarkably like a rabbit run. I met something soft which proved to be a goat, and something hard which proved to be our host's cooking pot, but eventually I reached a round cave, acrid with smoke from a smouldering wood-fire, and managed to stand upright again.

There was the usual *k'ang*, but otherwise the cave was without furniture and as the priest followed us into the light I gave a start, for I had never seen anybody who looked so old. From the beginning of time, I thought dully, perhaps he had lived this troglodyte's existence beneath his ruined temple, but the next moment I felt thoroughly ashamed of myself for he hustled eagerly forward and assured me the contents of his poor home were mine. "But I have little food," he added, "only a handful of rice and some tea. If that will satisfy our Honoured Guest for to-night we can go thieving in the gardens in the morning."

Before I could stop myself the words were spoken. "But you are a priest, a holy man. You surely do not thieve from gardens?"

The parchment skin creased into a thousand wrinkles. "Oh, yes," he laughed, "every one thieves in Yangpih, it is one of the most disagreeable small towns in all China."

I gave it up and sat down on the *k'ang*. It was part and parcel of the Highway, this astonishing meeting with a cave-dwelling Buddhist who spoke academic English in a clear, flute-like voice. Vaguely I heard Joe announcing that he would return to the bus if our host would be kind enough to house Miss Wei, Miao, the Corporal and myself, but I revived when someone pushed a bowl of steaming rice into my hands. "I must not be discourteous," said the priest gently, "but after you have eaten I should esteem it a great privilege if you would give me information about your England?"

Squatting cross-legged beside me as I wolfed the rice he told me his life story. Born in a village under the eaves of Tibet he had early been destined for the priesthood. "For my father was a very devout man, a true worshipper of Buddha, and for generations his ancestors had saved nobly that some day one member of the family might join the priesthood. Alas, they always had the large families and their ambitions had thus never been fulfilled, but my parents had eleven daughters and myself so I was fortunate indeed."

I interrupted stupidly, "You mean because your sisters did not require education?"

"No, no, because my father took them to the nearest town one by one as they reached puberty and sold them for much money which he saved for me. I was second youngest and by the time I was twelve he had sufficient means to send me to the

nearest monastery. Ah, I cannot describe to you, a foreigner, the joy of my education in that monastery! Year after year I studied until I was thirty years of age and considered wise enough to voyage forth on my priestly mission. So far I journeyed, even to the Forbidden City, to Tientsin, to Canton. Every province of China did I visit but always I longed for time in which to meditate, for only through meditation can one achieve real fineness of spirit. Twenty-five years ago I came to Yangpih—there are few Buddhists here, but those there are provide me with material necessities and then I rob the gardens of the atheists for vegetables. Very happy I have been here.”

Swinging the lantern he shuffled to a corner of the cave, beckoning me to follow him.

“My books,” he pointed proudly to several untidy heaps of shabby volumes and yellowed newspapers on the mud floor.

Together we squatted next to the most peculiar collection of literature I had ever seen. The priest seemed to have collected ancient Chinese papers from Peking to Shanghai, and in addition to these and huge piles of Chinese script he showed me a copy of Motley's *Dutch Republic* (one volume without covers); Tolstoi's *War and Peace* in the original Russian; *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot; and a tattered copy of Rabelais. “Much I have learnt from these books,” he told me.

I blinked at *The Mill on the Floss*. “You do not study other religions?”

He shook his wizened head. “There is no truth in any of them and if one reads untruths one's mind becomes blunted. But one book I should like to read about your Christianity. It was written fairly recently by a Jew named Josephus.”

Fairly recently! Gazing awe-struck at the old priest I realized that to him and his fellows the passage of two thousand years was literally but a handful of days. “How old are you?” I blurted out.

He answered he was born in the same year as the last and indomitable Manchu Empress and I believed him. Indeed, if he had told me he had lived on earth since the Ming dynasty I shouldn't have been surprised. “And do you know,” he added, “until this moment I have never spoken to an English person.”

“But your English is perfect!”

He bowed in pleasure above clasped hands. “That is excellent



information! Now I know that my long lectures and my speech have not been in vain."

The dormouse wandered up to us, snuffling his fat way sleepy.

"Go to bed on the *day* then," I replied a little cross. For myself I did not know whether I was asleep or awake. Whether the priest was real or a figment of my overtaxed brain. I was conscious only that I could not break this fantastic concentration.

The other three curled up on the *day*; the priest and I sat on by the books. He asked me innumerable questions about Oxford and Cambridge Universities, about English day life, about Napoleon's tomb in Paris, description of which seemed to fascinate him. But when, in my speech, I alluded to the Great War or to anything which had happened in Europe over the last hundred years he waved my words aside. "Modernity, as they call it, does not interest me, it has no spiritual meaning."

"Yet you in China are anxious to achieve modernity," I pointed to the three huddled sleepers. "Those three ask me many eager questions about Western civilization."

"They are foolish. They talk too much of little things, they do not *meditate*. Our young people of to-day speak of unity for China as some new thing to be won through the present war with Japan, which is ridiculous. China has always held unity; it grows out of her soil into the hearts of her people. A Chinese worships his ancestors and also the country which gives him sustenance during his short stay upon earth and welcomes back his body when death comes to him. What have these basic emotions to do with this war against Japan? It seems to me quite unnecessary, this war. Look at him," he shot out a finger in the direction of the Corporal. "What is he but a dead man on holiday? There is no need for him and millions like him to die. We should have let the Japanese invade what territory they chose, secure in our knowledge that conquest of our country was impossible."

Were there many men like this priest in the queer land of China? I wondered. Nursing the *Dutch Republic* on my lap I hoped there were, for somehow this man had more essential faith in his country than most. He was an odd bird, of course, and as the night wore on and I summoned up courage to question him he grew odder. He saw no horror or shame in the selling of his sisters into houses of prostitution that he might join the

priesthood; he did not understand my argument that he could scarcely worship ancestors and country equally with Buddha—"the former is my belief, the latter my religion," he said with dignity; and he informed me in all solemnity he considered George Eliot's novel infinitely superior to the *Dutch Republic*. Finally he delved into a heap of rags and dragged forth a monstrous alarum clock of American make. "I have been selfish and tired my Honoured Guest with my chatter. Now you must lie on the *k'ang* and I will place this beautiful timepiece by your head so that you will awaken. Do you not admire this clock? A visitor who craved shelter here brought it, a much travelled man who had been far overseas, and I begged it from him."

With much pomp the clock was wound up, the priest setting the hands at ten o'clock although the correct time must have been somewhere around three a.m. "And now the bell," he said, "which will awaken you with its melodious ringing," and he twiddled the alarum for two o'clock.

Alarum clocks had long been my pet detestation, but I heaved myself on to the *k'ang*, levered the Corporal slightly out of my way and submitted meekly to the hateful clock being set on the floor just below my right ear. It had the loudest tick imaginable, the sort that dinned through the head, yet the charming incongruity of being presented with this atrocity by one who regarded Josephus as quite a modern writer pleased me so much it hardly worried me.

In no time the Corporal awakened me by a series of violent prods in my ribs, and between us we roused a querulous dormouse. Miaou, thank heaven, was silent, murmuring lugubriously that he never trusted Buddhists and glancing apprehensively into the corners of the cave as though afraid a devil might pop out at him. I had a momentary impulse to ask him what his particular religion was, remembering the fuss he had kicked up when we carried a dead nigger boy to Pao Shan, but refrained. A silent Miaou meant a pleasant day.

"Now we rob the gardens," said the priest, so we crawled through the tunnel and formed a ludicrous single-file procession, leaping from boulder to boulder to avoid the mud. The Corporal felt sure the Yangpih inhabitants would load him with gifts because he wore a uniform, but the dormouse and I suffered no such illusions. The houses were still closely shuttered but

occasionally a terrified eye rolled at us through a crack and when we reached the middle of the main street we discovered Joe making an impassioned speech for food rather after the manner of a Roman orator which did not seem to attract Yangpih in the least.

Miss Wei and I espied an intrepid child milking a goat, but when we approached him proffering two whole dollars for his pail of milk he dropped it and fled howling into the woods.

"Such energy is wasted," frowned the priest. "besides, two of the men in those houses have guns. Here are the gardens: if the Honoured Guest and Miss Wei will pick beans we will gather the Indian corn."

I wanted to ask if the armed citizens would not be more likely to fire upon thieves than upon suppliants, but the rest of the party climbed the low wooden fences and seized some yellowish cabbages so I made an apron of my skirt, filled it with withered beans and contented myself by saying mildly that if we pushed a few dollars under somebody's doorway with a note of explanation perhaps our crimes would be forgiven.

"They forgive nothing in Yangpih," answered Joe snappily. I think he was disappointed his oratorical efforts had not made more impression.

Instead of returning to the priest's underground abode we walked to the bus. Ching had changed the wheel but said he felt fever coming on, and the sick engineer seized and ate half a pound of raw stringy beans before I could stop him, so my sympathy for him vanished.

"Fire," said the priest, and by some alchemy found dry brushwood in the undergrowth, although I could see nothing save sodden wood and mud. Our breakfast was therefore enormous and satisfying, and we lingered over it until Joe galvanized us by saying it was eleven o'clock. He and the priest had an argument over that, since the latter swore his beautiful alarm registered a much earlier hour, but soon they were friends again and we began to make our farewells.

"I suppose," the priest's tone was wistful, "you have no English books I might beg of you?"

Desperately I hauled out my suitcase and started a frantic search, much to Joe's annoyance. "He doesn't really want a book."

"Don't be so asinine. Do you realize foreign books are his most cherished possessions?"

The disastrous part was I hadn't any books because I had been obliged to travel as light as possible, and all I could muster were a pamphlet on the copper mining industry of Northern Rhodesia, a fearful Japanese booklet advertising cheap day trips through Peking, and a much creased page of the Rangoon Gazette, which was wrapped around a pair of shoes.

"Beautiful!" crooned the priest. "Stay, please, while I fetch you a gift in return," and off he skipped, his rotund body positively bouncing from boulder to boulder.

Ten minutes later he reappeared, a roll of rich deep blue silk tucked under his arm. "For my Honoured Guest," he bowed; then added in a sibilant whisper, "I begged it from a visitor once. I have given Honourable Chow my address. If by any chance you can ever beg a copy of the works of Josephus from a European friend it would be a tremendous kindness if you would send me the book?"

We thanked him for all his hospitality and I said I would do my best. As the bus lurched forward the priest stood in the centre of the road, waving both arms and shouting "Good-bye!" I turned to Joe, "There seems to be a remarkable lot of begging goes on around Yangpih?"

He laughed. "The district between here and Hsiak'Wan is famous for its beggars. There is even a legend that mendicants come from all over China to take lessons from them in the art."

We discussed the priest happily, until I noticed Ching's back. His shoulders were bowed apathetically and his head almost touched the wheel. Climbing over into the seat next to him I studied him anxiously. He looked exceedingly ill and bright fever-spots burned on his high cheek-bones. Having developed very real affection for this man who had driven us so far and proved such a good friend, I gave him a dose of the fresh quinine purchased in Pao Shan and implored Joe to make him stop and rest.

"Nonsense," he replied, "we are only twenty-five kilometres from Hsiak'Wan."

My glance was grim; he had the grace to admit there were kilometres and kilometres in China, but still insisted Ching would be all right.

"No, he won't. He'll have pneumonia by nightfall. The priest gave me some tea, so if we stop we can get a fire going and make him some."

"Fever," said Miao in a stilted voice, "is a small ailment to a coolie. May I borrow your nail-file."

I scowled and wished I was as clever at finding dry wood as the priest had been. All around us were forests of pine and fir, and still beside us ran the river in its gorge, but I persuaded Joe at last to let me roll Ching in a couple of blankets after he had drunk the hot tea. "If he has even half an hour's rest he'll feel better."

I wasn't exactly popular, so cooked some more beans in an effort to placate my companions. "They are good," nodded Joe, "but if we hurry we can reach Hsiak'Wan for midday chow."

I gestured towards the sleeping Ching. "He must sweat the fever out first."

Shouts of indignation arose. Nobody in China bothered about such things! And as though to prove the remark Ching sat up suddenly, perspiration streaming down his face and neck, and consumed such vast quantities of beans my fears lessened.

When he started to drive again, however, my heart went into my mouth and stayed there. We set off with a jerk which nearly sent us into the river, his steering was so erratic he could not attempt to negotiate the ruts and boulders on the road, but he clung tenaciously to the wheel and curled his bare toes round the accelerator pedal determined to reach Hsiak'Wan. The Corporal came to the rescue and sat beside him working gear-levers and hand-brake, and we laboured shakily up hills and down others for the Highway here was one long switchback.

Our speed averaged some five miles an hour and I wondered dreadingly whatever would happen to us if Ching was unable to drive at all, and the rains pelted down again with venom. "Miserable?" demanded Joe; and to my own amazement I answered "no", and realized I spoke truly. Stroking the soft roll of blue silk I remembered the priest who meditated in Yangpih and felt humble.

IV

It was night when we limped into the walled city of Hsiak'Wan and, as he pulled to a standstill outside the guest-house, Ching collapsed over the wheel and Joe and the Corporal had to carry him into an untidy courtyard which seemed alive with builders working by torchlight. The manager, it appeared, had retired early to bed and eventually arrived in shirt and kimono, very cross at being disturbed. "Guest-house unfinished," he informed Miss Wei and myself with dignity, saw Joe as someone flashed a lantern and positively wobbled at the knees. He regretted so much that Mr. Chow had taken him unawares, anything he could do for our comfort should be done immediately, perhaps the honoured guests would step this way?

We didn't. We sat down on a mass of builders' rubble and waited until Joe's passion was spent and the manager had shrunk several sizes smaller. The courtyard had an evil smell, there was no sign of a boy, from a room opposite us came sighs and grunts. The dormouse and I were so exhausted we sat slumped forward, our arms trailing between our knees, our bones craving rest and our stomachs clamouring for food.

"Moonkey, *fan*," whispered Ching beside me, so I dragged myself to my feet and went in search of the little beasts who had been left in the baggage compartment. On my return I met Joe and the manager engaged in fierce argument in the passage.

"If the guests would wait six weeks," whined the latter, "they could have bedrooms. So far none are built."

Joe raged, "Two months ago when I was here everything was planned so that the house would be absolutely ready by June 1st. What have you been doing, oh lazy fool?"

I interrupted. "I'll go down on my bended knees for a room, Joe."

The manager seized on me as a grand excuse. "English," he said admiringly, "moonkeys English too?"

Joe whirled on him. "Go and rout out your boys and tell them to prepare food for eight. The English lady and Miss Wei will sleep in your office."

I said stubbornly, "We've got to get a doctor for the engineer and Ching."

Hsiak'Wan boasted but one doctor and he had gone to a clinic several miles away. Grimly I washed the patients, rolled them in blankets and left them lying on the dining-room floor while we ate. The manager rushed at me with a bowl of rice which I proceeded to spoon out for the monkeys.

"No, no, for English lady!"

I said, "Moonkeys, *fan*. Go and bring some more for me."

Tearfully he protested that rice was at a premium in Hsiak'Wan but Miao came to the rescue. "That is a wicked lie. I have seen most excellent chow ready in another room for the gentleman's own consumption."

The manager capitulated under Joe's stony glare. Within five minutes we were enjoying his supper—he must have possessed an enormous appetite because different plates of pork, goat, noodles and beans made their appearance, there was a huge bowl of soup and enough rice for eight bowls. "Yet rice," said Miao sarcastically, "is so scarce in Hsiak'Wan."

Too fatigued to eat much I supped the hot, comforting soup, but presently the manager bustled back. "Outside there is a lost priest from Italy. Nobody understand Italy. Would English lady please speak with him and ask his requirements?"

I laid down my spoon and gaped at him. Somebody had surely strayed a long way from the Vatican?

"Bring him in," commanded Joe.

A queer figure entered. He wore riding breeches and a khaki shirt under a long black cloak, top-boots and a sombrero hat, and in slim hands he clasped a Bible. Studying his black bearded face with its thin arrogant features I decided his only affinity with Rome was the Book he held. "Do you speak French? I have only a few words of Italian."

"Yes, yes," he answered eagerly.

"I don't like him," hissed Joe. "Ask him what he is doing here."

"And how have you journeyed to Hsiak'Wan, Father?"

He mumbled into his whiskers that he did not know. I didn't know either; it seemed altogether odd that a priest of the Holy Catholic Church had travelled so far into the interior of China without knowing why or how.

I tried again. "But one does not undertake such a journey

without reason. Are you a missionary about to take up work in China, or are you travelling for pleasure?"

"I am nobody," he announced dramatically. "I dislike very much this country and its peoples, but it is my duty to reach Chu'Fsiung and I beg you to take me with you to-morrow."

Suddenly I wanted to laugh. Such a lot of people became beggars in or around Hsiak'Wan, especially priests of varied denominations. Turning to Joe I explained about the "nobody" and the request for a lift.

"Certainly not; the man is a spy."

"Oh, I wouldn't go so far as to say that; he's probably just a little queer in the head." But I wasn't too sure of the priest myself and eventually it proved that he and his activities were to prevent my own return to Burma by the Highway.

He leaned forward with a smile, "You will take me then?"

"I am very sorry indeed, but our's is a Government bus and we have no room for passengers. In two days or three there will be an ordinary bus to Chu'Fsiung."

He drew himself up and his expression changed. "The English are an abominable race—soon they will suffer for their arrogance. Good-night, Madam!" With a polite flourish of the sombrero he turned and vanished into Hsiak'Wan's black night.

In silence the five of us regarded each other. The manager reappeared, wringing his hands, "So impolite he was! I begged of him to remain another six weeks so that he might stay at my guest-house but he walked away."

I said I was going to bed, so Joe escorted Miss Wei and myself to the office. "I'll sleep with the Corporal and Miao on the dining-table; that is after I've had a row with that manager and seen his books are in order. Ching says he will be able to start again to-morrow."

"He can't, he's got a raging temperature."

"He'll be all right after a night's sleep. See, here is your room."

Brandishing the lantern high above his head he shone it within the open doorway, and the dormouse and I gasped. The room was large, square and occupied already by ten figures who slept in grotesque attitudes on the floor. My cot-bed had been set up above three pair of human legs and the dormouse's quilt

had been unrolled; otherwise the room simply did not belong to us.

"Oh, dear," said Joe helplessly, "can you manage?"

After one glance at his stricken face I said, "Yes." Poor Joe, who tried so hard to bring efficiency to the minds of his underlings and who suffered such ghastly disappointments. He sighed in relief and left us, so we put the lantern on a table, dragged two chairs together and spread the dormouse's quilt over them, and hopped into bed.

Trouble began at once. From the floor beside me popped up a shrouded figure, the bereaved woman with her skirt worn shawl-wise over her head. "Oo-aa-oo-ee-oo. . . .?"

"Oh, dormouse, dear, tell her once and for all that I'm terribly sorry for her but I can't understand a word she says to me."

There was a chatter of Cantonese then, in awe-struck English. "Bigland, she says the nine men on the floor are all sick with a mysterious disease. There is no hospital in Hsiac'Wan and the doctor has them here because he says they are infectious to others. They are all beggars."

Resignedly I replied that another disease more or less could not harm us, and turned over; but presently the most appalling cater-wauling arose outside the door. "My God, what's that?"

"Wailers," announced the dormouse. "The woman whose son is dead has hired them to mourn him."

I sat up in bed and used every swear word I knew. When I paused for breath I panted, "Tell them to clear out."

"But we cannot, Bigland. We will offend the woman's religion."

The sick men stirred with the noise, tossed and muttered, moaned and spat. Holding the lantern down I glanced at them. They were beggars all right; their rags were filthy, their limbs encrusted with sores, their skins discoloured. Just then Joe walked in. The Corporal and Miao fully occupied the dining-table, might he sleep on our's?

"You can have my bed with pleasure." Seizing my hairbrush I hopped out and he hopped in. To the accompaniment of wails I spent the remainder of the night sitting cross-legged on the floor, the lantern beside me, squashing bugs, and with each crack of the hairbrush I said with malice, "There goes another beggar of Hsiac'Wan."

Chapter Nine

GOOD-BYE TO THE HIGHWAY

I

I leaned against the door of the office trying to summon up sufficient energy to go and find the manager, the doctor and the monkeys. In the dawn light the courtyard appeared to be filled with dead bodies, but closer inspection proved these to be the sleeping builders who lay huddled in a cluster of wood shavings, saws and planks. Beside me the wailers still chanted their wake for the dead and from behind came the animal-like noises of the nine beggars. Joe beckoned me from across the yard but I shook my head, wishing dimly that he would leave me alone to conquer the misery induced by a night in Hsiak'Wan.

"Breakfast ready," he shouted.

"I don't want any; go away."

He made a face at me, vanished and reappeared bearing a huge steaming bucket in one hand and two metal basins in the other. Staggering towards me he dumped these at my feet. "Now wash," he commanded, "once you are clean you will feel better."

"Leave me alone."

I have since felt humbly grateful to Joe for forgetting the Western niceties of life at that moment. I suppose he realized I might turn into a Chinese beggar if not jolted out of my apathy, because he seized my shoulder with one hand and stripped me of my grimy shirt with the other. "Wash, I said!"

Gripping the back of my neck he bent me above the bucket and sluiced the hot water over my face, neck and back. I gasped—and came alive. "Where's the soap?" I spluttered.

He thrust a cake of Lifebuoy into my fingers, stripped off his own shirt and plunged his arms into the bucket. Together we splashed, scrubbed ourselves to our waists, fought as to who should have first go at washing feet and legs, rubbed ourselves dry with a harsh, prickly towel. Ten minutes later I was aware that the sun was shining and that I was immensely hungry.

Lapping our liquid rice we beamed at each other, conscious of complete friendliness. Impulsively I said, "Where did the legend that the Chinese are an incomprehensible race spring from?"

He chewed a toothpick thoughtfully. "From the Westerners who regard us as a race of yellow animals and forget that we practised civilization many centuries before they did. You have not made that error. You have travelled with us, laughed and been angry with us, seen birth and death with us—we are friends. But then," he added comfortably, "you are not like an English-woman."

This time I *knew* that was a compliment.

"What about Ching?"

Joe giggled. "'Your poor darling,'" he quoted, using the expression I had employed when feeling sorry for Ching the previous day, "has had his breakfast and is fetching the petrol from the depot. The engineer, however, seems very sick."

"He must have the doctor before we start. Honestly, Joe, those beggars last night got me down. I haven't yet acquired your indifference to sickness and death, I can't bear another corpse in the bus."

"All right," he soothed, "we will have the boy take you to fetch the doctor."

The boy was far more intelligent than the manager and explained volubly he had been visiting his wife the evening before. "I learn the English in Shanghai hotel. Doctor live good way away. Lady travel by wheelbarrow, no rickshaws in Hsiak'Wan except for business men, bad place."

I had travelled in many forms of transport, but never in a wheelbarrow. Pleasantly thrilled, I tucked myself into the one brought to the door and hitched my knees up to my chin, while the coolie seized the handles and trotted off at a fine speed.

Bowling through the narrow streets I revised my opinion of Hsiak'Wan, for all the romance of Far Eastern trading was in this ancient city of the plains ringed about by belts of fir and pine. Past us pack mules stepped delicately, laden with baskets of green tea, rice or wheat, with occasionally a huge water buffalo carrying Tibetan gold and sometimes tiny grey donkeys mincing along under their loads of pigs' bristles. The people seemed much busier than in Pao Shan and they walked briskly,

talking ceaselessly and gesticulating with their heads and hands. Crowds milled about the shops and stalls buying vegetables and meat, children threw flowers at each other, there was a general air of well-being not found in any other Chinese city I visited and due to the fact that Hsiak'Wan, because of its geographical position, had benefited far more than any other centre in Yunnan from China's war.

The doctor was old, infirm and exhausted by overwork; but his face creased into a gentle smile when the boy explained my errand and he said he would return with us. He shared my wheelbarrow, much to the coolie's annoyance and my discomfort, for I had not the Chinese gift of twisting my limbs into knots and had to perch precariously on the barrow's edge while the boy ran alongside holding me straight.

An infection eased the engineer considerably, so we carried him out to the bus where Ching leaned, limp as a rag doll, against the radiator. "But the doctor says," translated the dormouse, "that there is small chance of the engineer reaching Kunming alive. He wanted him to stop here but he is determined to go on."

I was more concerned with Ching. His fever had gone but he looked ghastly.

"Oh, he is O.K.," remarked Joc. "And now we go to Talifu. It is only fifteen kilometres off the Highway and you must not miss seeing it."

"Yes, I must. It means an extra thirty kilometres for Ching, that extra bit may just finish off the engineer and there is the poor woman who must reach Kunming as quickly as possible."

"But they all *want* to go; they have never seen China's Switzerland."

I was too weary to argue further, but as I climbed into the bus I pondered on Chinese ways. The bereaved woman's sole idea had been to reach her dead, the engineer's one desire was to die in Kunming, the Corporal only had a few days leave and Miao had been parted from his family for seven months, yet I knew all four would complain bitterly if we did not visit Talifu while Ching would probably develop another attack of fever through sheer vexation. My own wish to see Talifu had nothing to do with the matter; the others had simply made up their several minds to see Talifu.

11

It was, perhaps, a pity that the harassed woman, instead of the professional waiters accompanying her since she had hired them from midnight until noon and told Miss Wei they would walk back from the Highway junction as she had no intention of paying for an hour or two's waiting she had not had. But neither they nor the memory of the Hsiao'Wan beggars could destroy the loveliness of the little mountain town set beside Er-Hai lake, a ring of sapphire ringed about with snow-capped alps.

"Switzerland exactly, is it not?" inquired Miss Wei, and I found difficulty in explaining to him that despite the alps Talifu bore no resemblance to that country. "Why not?" his voice was bewildered, "Snow, mountains, water."

"Yes, but this scene is Chinese, a Swiss scene is European."

It was a feeble answer, but I was wholly unable to describe to someone who had never left China that Talifu had a character essentially Chinese. No alpine scene anywhere else in the world had such sugar-loaf peaks sharp-etched against a pale sky, such glowing ruby foothills, such a blue, unreal lake, and had a technicolor picture of it been thrown on to a cinema screen before an audience who had never visited China I believe nine out of ten would have guessed to which country Talifu belonged.

Joe was depressed. He, no less than my friend Mr. Tsing te Hiu, was immensely interested in the possibilities of foreign tourist traffic across the Highway when war should be over. "and if Talifu does not resemble Switzerland they will not like it," he grumbled.

"You are wrong, they will love it because it is so different to anything they have seen elsewhere."

"No," sighed Joe. "They are going to be most difficult to cater for altogether, these tourists. I shall have to provide soft beds and foreign food in all my guest-houses."

"I agree about the beds, but I've told you before it will be far better if you provide good chow such as they have at Pao Shan than if you attempt foreign cookery."

He scowled at me. "Most Honourable Bigland, you are my friend but your ideas on tourists are all wrong. In all our dis-

cussions of the question you have insisted upon such unimportant things—you say we must have other buses when no vehicle could be more luxurious than the one we travel in now; you talk of baths and lavatories and how every tourist must have a room to himself; you entirely miss the essential point which is foreign food."

The times we had debated this vexed question of future tourists were legion, and I had given up trying to convince Joe that if he brought one bus-load of foreigners across the Highway under the same conditions as myself, China Travel Service would never see another bus-load, so now I left him and Miao and wandered on to inspect the Tali marble slabs from which the town took its name.

Very exquisite they were, these ancient glimmering stones with their marvellous carvings, but unfortunately I had to shoo the party of waiters from them before I could appreciate their beauty, and as these gentry walked in fear of the bereaved woman's tongue they clustered behind me making the day hideous with their cat-calls. Joe came up behind me: "Let us forget the tourists," he pleaded, "I am sure I shall dislike them anyway."

In amity we strolled up the main street of the town. It was market day and the bazaar was a huddle of stalls heaped with larger and greener cabbages than any I had seen so far, but these and Indian corn seemed the only produce and Joe told me that food was very scarce and the people indolent. I was not surprised at the latter statement because here, as in the hill villages of the fever-belt, goitre was prevalent owing to the lack of salts in the water and there was hardly a man or woman without a pendulous horror dangling from the throat.

But selfishly I wanted only to enjoy the amazing loveliness of Talifu; the delicate painted arches which spanned its narrow climbing streets, the warm brown houses flaunting gay coloured banners over their doorways, the sleepy golden oxen with their slow tinkling bells, the brilliant garments of the hill-folk, the sleek coats of the water buffalo as they marched down to the lakeside.

We too went down to Er-Hai, I to swim, the others to squat on the bank exclaiming at my bravery. "Wait until Anning, near Kunming, where there are hot sulphur lakes," pleaded Joe; and the dormouse shrieked I should develop pneumonia forth-

with, but I was floating on my back gazing up at the snow peaks towering far above me and knowing all delight. The water was so clear that each dart of the myriads of tiny fish was a flash of silver, in the depths some feathery weed formed fairy forest, just beside me a heron swooped and rose again with a shining victim in its beak, and over my head sailed a flight of wild geese, long necks stretched out, wings superbly balanced.

All too soon Ching signalled that it was high time we left this delectable place, but when I rejoined the party in refreshed mood Miao was lugubrious. "What is wrong with him?" I whispered to Joe.

"He says there are devils in Er-Hai and that they have imbued you with evil spirits. And do not say that is nonsense," he added quickly, "for he may be right. Queer things happen in these mountains."

I reflected that poor Miao must have endured agonies while quartered near Salween. It was a curious thing, this Chinese fear of remote hill-places, and although the more travelled people, such as Joe and Miss Wei, put bad influences down to bandits, or poison-gases rising from the soil, or insects, at base they were as truly superstitious as Miao, and honestly believed that the devil himself lurked behind every mountain. But I knew better than to probe into the reasons for such beliefs; the quickest way to lose a friendship is to do such a thing.

Turning our backs on the glittering mountains we ran south-east, twisting and climbing through a range of low red hills, and as I glanced back I saw the most astonishing change come over Talifu. Great clouds rose swiftly in the west and a grey sheet of rain shimmered down, shutting out the alpine view, and for the *n*th time since entering China I shivered slightly at the abrupt transition from sun to shadow. Still, I thought as I clung to the window-frame, the charm of Yunnan would vanish if she basked continually in sunshine, appreciation of her loveliness would fade if she always turned a smiling face.

We let the wallers out where the road branched back to Hsiak'Wan, thankfully. They stood in the mud giving the bereaved one a last terrifying scream for her money and it echoed in our ears as Ching pounded on across the plain. The rains were catching us up and he was determined to reach Chu'Hsiung before nightfall—not that I paid much heed to that laudable

desire, for all Chinese were always determined to reach somewhere by a certain hour and never did.

"Look," Joe pointed, "one of our biggest military aerodromes."

It was not an impressive place, a huddle of mud huts, a collection of rickety hangars, and a field so bumpy and muddy that I wondered how any machine ever took off from or landed on it. Even as we watched a small plane taxied valiantly across it, did a half-hearted flap a few feet off the ground and sank into the mire. "Only practice," soothed Miao, and the dormouse began a long story of how dangerous flying really was. I felt a little uncomfortable, for every one was obviously filled with regret: that I had witnessed the slight accident, so I was relieved when someone changed the subject.

"When do we have chow?"

I said: "The manager in Hsiak'Wan gave me some biscuits and rice cake. Surely they will keep us going until Chu'Hsiung?"

Everyone was most indignant, even the sick engineer whose cheek-bones were nearly poking through his parchment skin. They did not care about the rain, or when we reached Chu'Hsiung; all they required was food, so we drew up opposite a tiny eating-house. "You," said Miao gently, "have the Western desire for speed; we have not."

That seemed pretty good when only yesterday they had all been clamouring for Kunming, but I restrained myself and helped the Corporal drag the engineer from his resting-place on the rifles. "Don't you think you ought to stay here and let us bring you out some food?" I asked; but he insisted the effort would do him good.

He was so weak we had practically to carry him and when we propped him on a bench indoors he fell forward across the dirty table-cloth, but nobody paid any attention.

"This is a very good restaurant," remarked Joe approvingly. "I shall arrange with the proprietor to serve meals for the Travel Service. It is just the place for tourists."

I looked around. The low ceiling and the walls had been whitewashed at some period of their career, the floor was a mess of spittle, bones and goat-dung, the table-cloth was stained and spotted, the greasy proprietor sweated above two extremely dirty stone coppers and the small room was black with flies. Grimly I imagined the reactions of a group of foreign tourists



introduced to such surroundings. For myself I had become used to curious eating-places to feel squeamish, but I did not mind a couple of candles and lit these in a vain endeavour to keep the flies away from our food. Not that it mattered much; plenty of their dead brethren floated in our noodle soup.

That soup was good. If you shut your eyes you could believe you were drinking beef-tea. The meat too was tender and the inevitable beans less stringy than in Hsiao' Wan, so we ate without pretty manners, pushing our spoons and chop-sticks past the engineer's head and arms but as we sipped our tea the Corporal announced firmly that he could observe signs of the dreaded paralysis creeping over the sick man's limbs.

Joe turned to me. "He says they have a wonderful treatment in the Army for such cases and that the proper thing is to get the blood circulating again. If we clear the table he will lay the engineer upon it and practise this cure. Just think, if we could only take him back to his wife a fit man!"

Ching cleared the table by the simple expedient of sweeping its contents into a convenient pail; then they spread-eagled the engineer on the dirty cloth, his muddy boots dangling grotesquely over one end, his head lolling over the other. I watched apprehensively while the Corporal removed his tunic and rolled up his shirt-sleeves. Advancing on the prostrate man, he seized his left arm and began pommelling and pinching it until great angry marks showed on the greyish skin. Horrified, I implored Joe to make him stop, but he frowned and motioned me to silence. This was a miraculous cure—but it must be done thoroughly.

The right arm suffered the fate of the left; then the Corporal started on the legs, and the engineer writhed and screamed with pain. Miao peered in satisfied manner. "Splendid cure; another hour and he will be all right." The flies buzzed, the candles flickered, the bereaved one began her "Oo-aa-ee-oo", the hot little room smelt unbearable, the engineer's tortured limbs lashed to and fro in frenzy. Unable to bear sight of such suffering any longer I wandered outside, squatted on the grass and took out a letter I had begun to write to H——. A phrase leapt up at me: "I have fallen in love with the Chinese en masse". Making as though to score it through with my pencil, I paused. Because of the scene being enacted in the stuffy room behind me had I radically altered my views on the Chinese?

The letter slipped unheeded to the ground. I was remembering Joe's words of that morning. "*You have . . . laughed and been angry with us, seen birth and death with us, we are friends.*" Disloyalty to that statement was unthinkable. Deliberately I picked up the letter and finished it.

III

Our afternoon was uncomfortable. We jogged on across the wind-swept plain where Hsiang'Yun and Chennan lay huddled in the rain, and at the latter place I saw unfamiliar signs of non-agricultural industry for here were copper and coal mines. "And they make brass articles," said Miao vaguely; but he was plainly uninterested in China's potential mineral wealth and gave me a long list of Chennan's products which included corn, barley, wheat and flax. "Oh, and animal hides," he added proudly.

Looking at the rather derelict evidences of mining activity I wondered drearily if there was any Chinese city which did not export animal hides, wondered also why such apathy overhung the slightest attempt to raise riches from the lands of Yunnan. Maybe the evil spirits which frequented the mountainous country also hid far beneath the red soil and people feared that the sinking of shafts would cause devils to pop up to the surface? That fear was prevalent in Central Africa, but there one was dealing with tribesmen not long weaned from savagery while here one was dealing with a race possessing the oldest civilization in the world. Yet how define civilization . . . ? "Oh, I give it up," I remarked to Joe, who turned in astonishment.

"Give what up?"

"Nothing. I say, look at the engineer, he'll never last until Chu'Hsiung."

Flat out he lay, his head thudding on the rifle-cases with each bump, his upturned face livid; but because I had lately seen so many men in similar state the sight filled me with annoyance rather than pity. What right had he to make our journey yet more exhausting by his absurd desire to die in Kunming? When in good health the Chinese were the most logical race imaginable where matters of life and death were concerned; when sick they lost all vestige of reason. Automatically I dabbled

water from a petrol can on to a towel and wiped his face and hands, smoothed his hair back, covered him over with a coarse blanket belonging to Ching, but all the time I thought that if I told in a book one-tenth part of the suffering, the disease and the tragedy witnessed during my journey across the highway nobody in Europe or America would believe me.

"Just fancy," said Joe brightly. "three weeks to-day since we left Lashio."

My dulled brain made a ponderous effort. Three short weeks? Joe was entirely wrong there. We had never lived, never should live, anywhere except in this bus.

We ate some crumbly rice-cake washed down with brackish boiled water; the bereaved woman insisted upon sitting huddled up beside me telling me her eternal sorrows; the engine made ominous sounds; the T.N.T. case on which my back rested grew even harder and, final touch to misery, the monkeys had chewed the last of my cigarettes.

It was almost midnight before we reached Chu'Hsiung. The guest-house here lay outside the city walls and in the pitch darkness we missed the narrow track leading down to it, so spent a full hour floundering about in ankle-deep mud while Joe and Miaou argued hotly as to where the track ought to be. "Roads," said the former, "do not uplift and relay themselves. When I was here two months ago . . ."

"As a child I stayed much in Chu'Hsiung," screamed the furious Miaou, "and I remember clearly that the track was here," and he splashed into what proved to be the canal.

In the end Ching found the track about half a mile back, so reversed down the Highway at a speed which threatened to tear his engine to pieces. "Excellent guest-house here," said Joe.

For once Joe was right. We were welcomed by a brisk young manager, highly excited because we were his first patrons, and he led me up narrow stairs to a delightful bedroom with walls of sweet-smelling pine and a vast and inviting Chinese bed. Ironically enough I was not destined to enjoy that bed, for when I descended, revived by tea and a large bucket of hot water, I found the Corporal holding down the engineer, who was delirious.

A boy was sent for Chu'Hsiung's only doctor, a cocky individual who had spent two years in the States. Watching me giving the sick man a tepid sponge bath, he announced, "Fever

patients should never be washed; you are killing him with your Western nonsense."

Very nearly I flung the sponge at him. He went on casually, "I am very short of atropin. Anyway, there is no need to waste it upon this fellow, he will die before morning."

For some unaccountable reason I suddenly determined that, having brought the engineer this far, I would do my utmost to see he lived through the night. "You'll give him an injection this instant—then come back to-morrow morning early."

The doctor glanced at his watch. "It is already to-morrow morning," he remarked acidly; but he drew out a hypodermic. Presently I heard him muttering to the manager that all foreign women were mad.

After his departure we devoured tender bamboo shoots, fried chicken and pork, delicious soup with little balls of dumpling floating in it, and as we ate the manager told us of the siege and fall of Nanking, where he had been in some large hotel. There had been unspeakable horror there—later on I was to see for myself the results of that horror—and the manager's wife and children were still interned in the occupied city.

"Very clever move of the Japanese," he said. "When the International Relief Committee begged that we should be released so that we might carry on with our various trades elsewhere, the Japanese allowed a certain number of the younger men to leave, but kept all our wives and families, forcing them to exist under dreadful conditions. My wife is permitted to write to me once a month, and though she dare not say very much I can read between the lines. I do not know yet whether my children still live—but one hopes, one always hopes."

Suddenly I pushed my bowl to one side. Impossible to eat while one listened to stories of Nanking. "I think I'll go to bed for an hour or two."

I had been in bed exactly ten minutes when the yells and screams of the engineer broke out again. Tumbling downstairs I did what little I could and then sat beside him until he dropped into an uneasy doze. The manager hovered by my shoulder. "Please," he whispered, "would you be so kind as to write a little testimonial of my guest-house, saying you are the first visitor?"

Half-asleep I crawled into the dining-room and nodded

above the typewriter. He brought out a gilt frame, popped my appreciation within it and hung it on the wall with pride. Thereafter we cracked melon seeds until dawn, talking of China's war and interrupting our discussions only to attend to my patient at intervals. He was worse. Only his protruding eyes seemed alive and if we moved him into the bus he would surely die, whereas if we left him with the manager he had maybe a faint chance of recovery. I tried to explain to him he had to stay. He was beyond speech, but his gaze was so tragic that I walked out feeling I had never done a worse thing than to abandon this man a bare hundred miles short of the goal for which he had striven so long.

IV

"To-day," announced the dormouse as she settled herself in the back seat, "I shall stay awake *all* the time."

Mr. Miao applauded. "And this evening," he added sentimentally, "I shall be reunited with my family."

There was, indeed, an air of suppressed excitement about this morning. Ching looked recovered from his bout of fever and sang lustily as he tinkered with the engine, the Corporal polished the flute-cum-piccolo and Joe issued generous invitation to half Chu-Hsiung to travel with us to Kunming. "They will have to pay, of course," he remarked judiciously as he watched the people trooping into the bus, "but think of the honour of journeying in the first passenger bus over the highway?"

I thought of my bruises and determined not to visualize arrival in Kunming.

As the morning advanced, however, I knew astonishment at the change which had come over the Highway. The mountains had vanished and our route curved between bare red hills, and in the shallow valleys the rice shone emerald and the coolies stooped, waist-deep in slime, to pick the grain. Every field was hedged about with prickly cacti and the sun beamed down upon us out of a cloudless sky. I ought, I am sure, to have welcomed this gentler countryside, but incongruously enough I longed for the towering mountains, the terrifying hairpin bends, the ribbon of road spiralling across an endless chain of peaks.

"Now you know," said Joe, "why we call the province the 'Garden of Yunnan'."

But I was gazing at the cacti, thinking again of their affinity with China, remembering the scarlet flower which blossomed yearly from their prickly stems.

The rosy hills clustered together, parted to give green and lovely view, closed while we threaded through narrow passes, and dipped once more to the paddy-fields where the coolies' hats showed like pale mushrooms and the wild geese honked as they fled before the noise of our engine. Then we came to a deep gorge glowing with the pink and yellow and white of rock-rose flowers, and against that glorious mosaic passed coolies bowed double beneath the great tortoise-shell-like loads of salt strapped to their backs. Sometimes a convenient shelf of rock gave them momentary respite, for on it they could prop their burden while they wiped the mud and sweat from their foreheads, but all too soon nemesis appeared in the shape of the foreman and they shuffled on again, expressionless, impotent. Looking at them I thought: And that is life for the great majority of people in China, an eternal shuffle through red mud or dust with the weight of the world on your shoulders and the knowledge that never any more will you be able to stand upright because the salt-load has permanently arched your spine.

Miau nodded approvingly at the coolies. "There is a big salt factory at the end of this gorge and I am glad to see they are doing so much work for salt is all-important to us—the goitre, you know," and he tapped his throat.

"Yes," said Joe. "It may interest you to know, Bigland, that the average life of a salt-coolie is five years."

My reply was tinged with passion. "So you limit one man's existence to five years that a score of his countrymen may go free of goitre?"

Both stared at me with their familiar owlish look. "What is wrong with that?"

For the second time in twenty-four hours I answered, "Nothing." But I could not feel any enthusiasm for the huge factory when we reached it although even the dormouse awakened and pridefully pointed out the whiteness of the stream which bubbled alongside the road in a wide ditch, and Joe asked if I did not think the factory itself a wonderful piece of architecture.

We stopped for chow in a village where two rival eating-house proprietors vied so keenly for custom that they spent their time dashing up and down the Highway after each other, with the result that the patrons they had already achieved sat unfed and perspiring in a couple of tin sheds. "I admire their spirit," said Joe. "It is difficult for me to decide which shall have the Travel Service trade," and he, too, dashed after the screaming proprietors, presumably to judge at closer range who was the wilier salesman.

Meantime I derived enjoyment from watching the cook of our establishment, who was making dough-cakes on a rough table beside me. Aided by two infants who dexterously picked a fair proportion of the flies out of the dough, he pounded and kneaded the sticky mixture. Presently he cut it into thin strips, stuck blobs of apricot preserve on each and twisted them into knots before popping them into a vast brick oven.

When he removed the first batch he offered me one. Most strangely it melted in the mouth, and when Joe returned we consumed three more apiece while waiting for our noodles, our sweet-sour pork and our bowls of rice.

As we ate the rival proprietors leaned above the table, elbowing one another aside in their efforts to engage Joe's interest, but by this time every one had worked themselves into a fine fervour about Kunming so their promises of faithful service went ignored—as did so many things in China. "My wife, my family!" Miao swayed raptly to and fro.

"I shall get my passport," chanted the dormouse, "and then I shall journey on to Hong Kong, and think, Bigland, I shall see my brother again whom I have not seen for seven whole years. So clever he is, so remarkably gifted that sometimes we dare to hope the mantle of our Dr. Sun Yat Sen has fallen upon his shoulders."

The Corporal and the bereaved woman were beaming at each other, but I glanced towards Joe, who sat, chin on hand, staring straight ahead of him. He was thinking of the wife to whom he had been married such a brief time, and as I watched his absorbed face I felt stupidly resentful because I, who had dreamed of Kunming for many years, could now arouse no enthusiasm for the city I had come so far to seek. Perhaps I had dreamed of it too long or perhaps I was too tired, mentally and bodily, to

appreciate the fact that only forty kilometres separated me from my goal? But when I followed the others to the bus I knew neither of these reasons explained my apathy; the truth was that I hated the thought of leaving the Highway.

The plains opened before us. They were broken by small lakes fringed with delicate trees on which innumerable multi-coloured birds perched, and on the eastern horizon a line of hills showed faintly blue. All around me my companions laughed and chattered and sang, while Joe and Miao told me tales of Yunnan's capital and clasped their hands ecstatically as we passed landmark after familiar landmark. "There is Anning," they shrieked, "we will take you there to bathe next week, and tomorrow is Sunday, the great shopping day in Kunming, so we must make an expedition for you."

Dully I watched Kunming lake shimmering ahead of us, more like a Chinese painting than any real lake had a right to look, but I flinched when Ford sedans hurtled past us, and rickshaws popped out of side-turnings, and lorries and trucks thundered by. This busyness quite devastated me.

Joe pointed out a burial-place, thousands of earth mounds by the lakeside. "The graves of the dead make excellent shelters for the living during air-raids."

"And none of our shops open until three in the afternoon in case the Japanese come," chimed in Miao.

"And there are white people in Kunming," added the dormouse. "Most of them are French, but there are a few English, Americans and Germans."

We swept on between rows of trim poplars, and although the surface of the road was still bumpy it was no longer the Highway which had breasted the hundreds of mountains between Burma and ourselves; it was simply any road on the outskirts of any big city. Regretfully I glanced at the three who had started with me from Lashio. Together we had laughed, argued, endured hardship, eaten and slept in this bus. . . .

Joe touched my arm. "To-night," he said gently, "you will come to our house to meet my wife and eat chow with us. We live quite near the Hotel du *Luck*."

Oh, dear, the "best French cookery" and the lake in the grounds, and all the amenities of civilization. I said hesitantly, "But the dormouse is staying with you. Your wife will want

to greet you and talk to you both; she will not wish to be bothered with a stranger on this first evening?"

He was genuinely shocked. "You also are our friend!"

That touched me. I sat bolt upright and tried to show an intelligent interest in my surroundings. Before us towered the grey walls of the city, the ancient stones removed in many places to allow for gun emplacements; on either side of us were barracks; on the horizon was a wireless station; under the poplars passed a constant stream of soldiers. Yet as we jolted uphill to a great arched doorway and I studied these grim reminders I did not think of the Sino-Japanese war. I remembered instead that other, romantic struggle to translate the vision of Sun Yat Sen into the road which was, in very truth, the gateway to new China.

So many times on my long journey across the Highway I had cursed it, loathed it, been bewildered by its swift changes of face. Even now I still marvelled how the Chinese had ever built the astonishing road, ever managed to get it to carry a hundred ammunition trucks a day over its sticky surface on which the rains beat so furiously. Approaching Kunming I understood that despite all the fevers lurking in its valleys, all the landslides threatening its mountain sections, the Highway was the red life-cord binding China to the outer world.

Far to the east and to the north the Chinese soldiers fought their enemies and the Chinese coolies toiled in starvation. They needed help urgently, desperately; it came to them by the Highway leading so dizzily from Wan Ting to the smiling garden of Yunnan Province, where the terror-stricken refugees huddled together unable to believe they had escaped from purgatory. No wonder the nation was proud of this road; no wonder it extolled the engineers, the surveyors, the hundreds of thousands who had helped to fashion it, for it was the most miraculous achievement in all China, the sign which showed she was stirring from the bonds of inter-provincial hatred that had held her through centuries, the tangible proof that a sense of unity was creeping across a vast sprawling land.

Only because I had travelled the Highway alone among the people who had created it did I know it was the imperishable, indestructible symbol of China's fight for freedom. The cost of the symbol had been—and still was—incalculable; but was any great nation ever shrived without colossal sacrifice?

"Stop dreaming," came Joe's stern voice. "Here we are at the city gates."

Obstinately I refused to look at the gates. I turned my head and stared back at the road which looped its way round the lakeside, and inside of me a hideous, intense pain gnawed. I loved the Highway—from it I had learnt far more than I could at present assess.

v

Everybody scrambled round getting their baggage together, and Miao panted an explanation that "heavy vehicles must not enter the city." The passengers we had picked up at Chu'Hsiung departed on foot in a chorus of farewells, the bereaved woman was greeted by a party of wailers hired by her daughter-in-law, the Corporal clasped his hands, bowed towards me and marched off trying to play his flute and balance his kitbag on his shoulder at the same time.

Joe said: "Rickshaws are very scarce in Kunming and they will not wait at the gates for customers, so I will run into the city and fetch two, one for you and one for your luggage."

I sat down on the running-board. An awful tiredness filled me and I felt lonely.

Ching tugged at my sleeve. He held the two monkeys by their chains and these he handed to me with an imploring expression. I shook my head, he nodded his, in desperation I appealed to the dormouse, who was snatching a final forty winks in the bus. "Ching is making me a present of the monkeys, and while I would not hurt his feelings for the world I really cannot take them. Can you explain nicely to him, Most Honourable Shan Ling Ngai?"

After an earnest conversation she smiled. "No, no, all he is asking you to do is to keep them for him until late this evening as he is afraid the Highway officials at the depot will not like it if he has them in the bus. He will call at Hotel du *Luck* at nine o'clock."

Ashamed, I stretched out my hand for the chains. Of course I would keep the monkeys for him and see they had a meal, and

would the dormouse please tell him also that I wished him to buy some small thing in memory of our friendship worth ten dollars?

There was very nearly a riot. Ching slipped in again, round and round the bus, the dormouse in hot pursuit waving the ten-dollar bill and screaming in Cantonese; but presently she returned exhausted and sank on to the board beside me. "He refuses to accept the money. He says you are his friend and if you wish to give him a present, please may he have your nail-file?"

Solemnly I produced this from my bag. Ching took it and bowed deeply; then he threw back his head and gave his merry infectious laugh. I did not laugh in return: I was too sad. Parting from this man who earned sixteen dollars a month and would not accept any reward for all his kindnesses towards me was a painful business. "He says he has no words in which to thank you but he regards this valuable instrument as his greatest treasure."

My answering smile was melancholy. Each moment the thought of setting forth through this strange city alone grew a little more agonising, and to add to the prevailing gloom it began to rain, not the torrential beating rain of the Highway but a depressing drizzle.

Joe appeared at length, hot, cross and out of breath. Behind him trailed two scowling coolies carrying a luggage pole and a couple of rickshaws with extremely voluble drivers. "The best I could do," he explained, and pointing to my baggage began a frantic argument as to what the charge would be. "They demand forty cents apiece," he informed me, "but do not give them more than thirty each for it is wicked to profiteer out of foreigners. The others"—he indicated the coolies with the pole—"can carry dormouse's luggage and my own, and we will walk behind."

We must have looked a crazy party as we trundled through the city gate. In front trotted the baggage coolies, yelling at the crowds to give them passage, then came a rickshaw piled high with my case and roll of bedding, while following this I sat enthroned in the second rickshaw, the typewriter clutched between my ankles, a pillow between my arms, one monkey perched on my head and the other on my shoulder. Behind me

walked the dormouse and Joe, both shrieking instructions as to my correct method of behaviour in the Hotel du *Luck*.

I did not reply to these; I was much too occupied in saving limbs, sanity, even life itself from imminent annihilation, for this part of the city was built on a series of steep small hills, and my coolie whirled up and down these at break-neck speed, occasionally leaving the shafts to tip heavenwards with an almighty jerk while he paused to wipe face and arms on a filthy greasy rag he wore draped about his throat.

On we careered and on, leaving Joe and the dormouse far behind, the excited monkeys performing a mad fandango all over me, the masses of people in the narrow streets staring open-mouthed at this rare picture of a European woman arriving in Yunnan's capital. Shopkeepers gathered in their doorways, children screamed delightedly, men and women rocked with laughter, even the oxen lowed in surprise.

Somehow we reached a level path which curved beside an odiferous canal and on our right stretched a stagnant, slimy pond covered in weeds mixed with a few attenuated water-lilies—the “beautiful *luck* in the grounds”.

The coolie drew up outside an imposing white building ranged around a courtyard, and from a little sort of gate-house emerged an excitable Frenchman and three sad-eyed Annamites who looked at me in amaze.

The Frenchman threw up his hands. “*Mon Dieu!*” he exclaimed.

I did not blame him. It was not every day that a guest arrived at his grand hotel covered in mud and a couple of monkeys; but I found it extraordinarily hard to collect my dignity while clutching pillow, chains and typewriter. “I want a room,” I gasped. “If you would be so good as to take some of this baggage . . .”

With true Gallic courtesy the Frenchman bounded forward and seized the pillow. In return the monkeys bounded at the Annamites, who lost their heads so completely that they rolled, a stupendous human and simian bundle, into the courtyard ahead of me and doors popped open on every side to reveal astonished French or Chinese faces.

They certainly got a run for their money. One monkey chewed three rose-bushes before making a perilous dash for the

roof, where it sat pelted the audience with a rain of stones. The other refused to be separated from an Annamite, the one which it had taken a violent dislike until the Frenchman poured a bucket of water over both; in the background the other Annamites danced in rage demanding their pay.

When order was restored the Frenchman stopped his shouting and bowed to me. "I regret I have no room available."

His tone was polite but firm: his look told me clearly that not for all the tea in Yunnan Province would he desecrate the portals of his so-beautiful hotel by allowing the entry of a guest such as myself.

I said feebly, "But a very small room, Monsieur, or just somewhere in which I can put my cot-bed?"

"I regret, Madame, no room. Perhaps Hotel du Commerce or Hotel de l'Europe . . . ? But you will have to hurry else the Michelin will be in and with it will come many, many guests to Kunming."

"Michelin?" I echoed in bewilderment.

"Yes, yes. The superlative train from Hanoi which runs every second day. The time now is five-thirty o'clock, the Michelin is due in another half-hour, and as it is owned by the French it is never late."

Again I pleaded for a room; again he was adamant. That was that. Suddenly I remembered the monkeys and the fact that Ching would be calling for them at nine o'clock. "These monkeys belong to one of the Yunnan-Burma Highway drivers and I promised to look after them for a few hours. Would you be so kind as to allow me to leave them here?"

A look of horror overspread his features. "My guests?" he stammered.

The situation was saved by a lady with very yellow hair and a silk suit from Rue de la Paix who dashed forward and hugged the wet monkey to her immaculate bosom, assuring me he was divine, adorable, miraculous.

I didn't share her opinion, but hugged the pillow and smiled. Reluctantly the Frenchman weakened. "If Madame cares to pay for the animals' keep and to provide me with a personal reference the matter might be arranged."

The poorer by fifteen dollars, I marched up to one of the Annamites. "Moonkeys, *fun*."

He gazed at me blankly. The Frenchman said icily, "Rice will be extra. And when this individual calls for the monkeys how shall I know his identity?"

Exasperated, I demanded to know if he thought that anybody who did not own the little beasts would wish to achieve possession of them, and parted with another two dollars for their rice. "And now would you be so kind as to direct the coolies to Hotel du Commerce?"

A pleased smirk decorated his mouth. "It is a *very* long way from here, the journey will be most expensive and Hotel du Commerce, of course, has no beautiful lake."

Bristling, I climbed into the rickshaw. "I do not propose, Monsieur, to sleep in a lake."

Two bribes of a dollar apiece were required before the coolies would consider restarting their journey, but eventually we moved off to the accompaniment of frenzied chatter from the entire hotel staff. Up and down more hills we went, round sharp corners we whisked, more and livelier attention did we draw from the populace. Aching all over, acutely conscious of my travel-stained garments, my muddy and mosquito-bitten limbs, my monkey-clawed hair, I huddled morosely in the rickshaw praying that the next turning might bring us to Hotel du Commerce. But the Frenchman had been right. We had to traverse endless colourful streets, pass under glowing archways, circle round the market where the flower-stalls blazed against grey walls, jolt along a straight muddy road leading to the railway before we trundled down a cobbled alleyway and drew up before a long verandah. From this two pukkha sahibs leaned indolently, but their backs stiffened when they caught sight of me. "Really," their glance said, "how can we hope to maintain Britain's prestige in the Far, Far East when a crazy fool of an Englishwoman lets us down like this?"

A small Chinese hopped down the steps. "No room, lady," he chanted, "no room at all."

I said, "Where is Hotel de l'Europe?"

He pointed down the alleyway. "At the end. Doubtless they will have accommodation. You care to return here to-morrow I give you a room."

I waved a limp hand towards the coolies. "Please tell them Hotel de l'Europe."

"They want more dollars, is it?"

They had them. For two and thirty shillings I had secured this damned city for a bed and breakfast for the night when I started. I was so weary I would have sold the whole package of dollars purchased from Mr. Chen in Rangoon upon the head of any one who could lead me to a resting-place.

And Hotel de l'Europe had no room either.

I leaned against its doorway in the rain, haranguing the Annamite manager. "You do not understand, Monsieur, it is absolutely imperative I find a room. Are there no other hotels in Kunning?"

He looked at me out of lack-lustre eyes. "There is the sanatorium," he remarked in a slow voice.

I brightened. "Where is that?"

He jerked his head in the direction from which I had come. "Up the road."

The coolies grunted with anger but plodded on over the cobbles. The pukkha sahibs still leaned on the Hotel du Commerce veranda but of a sanatorium I could see no sign. Suddenly, on the far side of the alleyway, I read a faded notice, "Hotel de la Poste," and as we came abreast of it a dark little woman was opening a door into a yard so that a man might drive a car within. I dropped the pillow on to the muddy cobbles, stood up in the rickshaw and howled, "Madame, Madame, have you a room vacant in your hotel?"

She ran towards me and I explained my plight. She was afraid a proper room would not be available until the morrow, but never mind, somehow she would accommodate me that night, even if I had to sleep in her bathroom. Chattering gaily, she rescued the pillow, took the typewriter and yelled to someone called Georges to help with my baggage. Limply I followed her across the yard and through a glass-panelled door into a low-ceilinged room along one side of which ran a bar. From behind this an elderly Frenchman greeted me courteously. "Good-evening, Madame, you come from Hanoi?"

I flopped into a wicker chair. "No, from Burma."

They crowded round me then, he, Madame and Georges (who was an ex-heavyweight boxer), exclaiming at my bruises, my bites, my dirtiness and my temerity in travelling the Highway.

They paid off the coolies, mixed me a long iced Pernod, led me to an indubitably Western bathroom and left me there to wallow peacefully in steaming hot water until the chime of a clock brought me back to reality. Heavens, eight o'clock, and I was supposed to eat chow at Joe's at 7.30! Dressing hurriedly in clean but damp clothing, I called to Madame to find me a rickshaw.

"You must dine first," said Georges firmly.

"No, no, I promised to dine with some Chinese friends."

They thought me mad, said so resignedly and hailed the rickshaw. "You know the address?" asked Georges.

I produced a much-thumbed screw of paper, but as Joe had written the address in Chinese characters neither Georges nor myself could decipher, and as the rickshaw coolie could not read his own language it did not take us much further. "But I know the way," I remarked grandly, "one goes past the Hotel du Luck and turns right."

"You will get lost in Kunming," said Madame dramatically. "Eighteen years I have lived in this awful city and still I do not know my way about."

"And the *pousse-pousse* coolie will rob you," added Georges; but as he waved that worthy on he whispered he would keep some food hot for me "because Chinese chow will surely poison you."

I reflected wryly that in that case my demise was definitely overdue; then devoted my energies to shouting at the coolie, who seemed determined to take every wrong turning he possibly could. We prowled down side streets and cantered up main ones, plunged into dark and narrow lanes, went three times on end round the market, knocked over an aged man, two children and a dog . . . still no sign of the "beautiful *luck*". The moon was high in the sky before we found it, and outside the gate-house the coolie stopped. "No, not the hotel. I want to go on."

He shook his head, stamped his feet, gave an embarrassing display of temperament which brought the excitable Frenchman to the door once more. "Ah!" His glance swept me, appraising my changed appearance. "I think," he said gently, "we *have* a room now."

I smiled sweetly. "But I do not require it, Monsieur."



The effect of this acid interchange was slightly weakened by the coolie's refusal to move on despite prods in the back and a few sibilant Russian swears.

"He wants a dollar," smirked the Frenchman.

Was there ever a time when a Kunming rickshaw coolie didn't want a dollar? I handed him one and he crawled forward, but half-way along the canal bank he dropped the shafts, rubbed his stomach, said "chow" and disappeared. Indignantly I screamed at his retreating back; he never even turned his head. It was his hour for food and all the foreigners in China could wait upon his pleasure.

It was pretty dark beside the canal. I stepped out of the rickshaw into a foot of mud and began to walk in what I imagined to be the direction of the Chow household. Never having had much bump of locality, I stumbled through a maze of streets without the least idea of where I was going, asked the way of several Chinese who did not understand a word I said, finally bought some matches from a shopkeeper who knew a little English. Joe's house, he told me, was one which I had already passed several times in my peregrinations so, immensely cheered, I trotted up the street, skirting piles of refuse until I reached a short tunnel leading to a yard. There were no lights anywhere and I had lost count of the time I had wasted since eight o'clock, but I banged on a wooden door and presently Joe's tousled head and pyjama-clad shoulders appeared from a nearby window. "Bigland?" he said sleepily.

The appalling truth dawned upon me. The Chow family were all abed!

Embarrassed, I sat in their sitting-room and tried to explain my lateness while Mrs. Chow, a very pretty slim girl, made me a cup of Ovaltine and brought out a box of biscuits. It was all right, they said, but they had gone round to Hotel du Lac and being unable to trace me had worried as to where I was. "For you are a daring person," remarked Joe thoughtfully, whereat I choked over my Ovaltine.

He then dragged on Wellington boots above his pyjama trousers and sallied forth in the rain for a rickshaw, while Mrs. Chow and I planned a shopping expedition for the following afternoon. The dormouse was asleep—as usual—so I apologised again and climbed into my conveyance. "And tell him that if

he wants chow on the way back I am definitely not playing," I said grimly to Joe.

"Kick him," he replied, "and do not give him more than twenty cents."

So I lumbered back through the moonlit city feeling thoroughly wretched. Five hours of rickshaw travel tended to depress the strongest visitor to Kunming—and I was feeling anything but strong. Until our bus had pulled up at the city gate I had not realized how dog-weary my body was and, in addition, either the Pernod or the rains or my state of acute hunger had brought back symptoms of the dysentery cured by opium in Pao Shan. But perhaps this wasn't the onset of dysentery? Perhaps it was the beginnings of the fell plague which had attacked the beggars of Hsiak'Wan? It was a ridiculous thought, but I was in a ridiculous frame of mind, and by the time we turned down Hsueh Tsin Chieh, the cobbled alleyway leading to Hotel de la Poste, I was convinced that the sickness of death had come upon me.

I handed the driver thirty cents—I simply hadn't the courage to offer him twenty—and the yard resounded with his curses. Out of the door whirled the redoubtable Georges. "You came from where, Madame, and you gave him how much? Ah, I will settle him!" Taking coolie in one huge paw and rickshaw in the other, he hurled both into the street.

I did not wait to see what happened. I crawled to the lighted doorway and stood there a moment blinking at the brilliant row of bottles behind the bar. A man sitting on a high stool turned so that the light fell full on his thin tanned face, revealing the mocking hazel eyes, the humorous mouth, the relentless line of the jaw, and I stared and stared at him, fascinated. It couldn't be true, of course, this was the Orient, not the Occident, and you didn't meet again in far Kunming the one person whose mood always suited your own. Then his mouth broke into a laugh and I walked towards him. "Oh, Cass, I feel so ill."

Chapter Ten

MIRAGE BECOMES REALITY

I

"UP IN Mukden," said Cass, "the Japanese wander into French and English offices, use the typewriters, the notepaper, anything else they fancy; and in the streets they swagger up to European women and chuck them under the chin. When complaints are made to the Consuls they implore people to leave the city, saying they can do nothing to stop the Japanese insults to foreigners. Yet people at home prate about the Japanese being such an intelligent, enterprising race. My God, if they knew the incredible sadism of the whole nation, from the leaders down to the soldiery, they would shiver when they saw the shadow of a little yellow man."

I stared dreamily out of the netted window to the rose-garden of l'hôpital Calmette (the sanatorium I had been unable to find the night of my arrival). "But you like the Chinese?"

"I *dislike* the Chinese: I hate the Japs."

That roused me, and his detailed explanations of why he disliked the Chinese angered me so much I sat up in bed and implored him to stop. "You're so abominably, so ruthlessly logical, why can't you let just a grain of humanity into your view?"

"How can you apply humanity to a people who know nothing of such a quality? Come along, stop arguing and take your medicine, otherwise you will be ill again."

For three days now I had lain in Cass's room in the Calmette while he ministered to me as gently as any woman. He had anointed me with cooling lotions, put cold compresses on my head, cured my dysentery with opium as had "all the fun in the world", washed me, fed me, even given up his bed to me while he slept in the bathroom, but this afternoon I was beginning to feel truculent, sure sign of convalescence.

"I want to get up, I feel ever so much better. Besides, think of the appalling waste of time, I've got a job to do in Kunming."

He grinned at me. "All right. Then first I will show you things that will prove to you the Chinese have no humanity."

We wandered through the rose-garden, where an aged coolie stooped tenderly above a perfect bloom, and strolled down the alleyway towards the river. Through the hot still air came a curious clanking sound. "What is that?"

"You will see in a moment."

The clanking grew louder, and round a corner came a band of some hundred men, their bodies covered in noisome rags, their ankles linked together by heavy chains which trailed on the ground between them. Nearly bent double these men were, with shrivelled yellow faces and terrible sores on their emaciated chests and arms, and a dumb apathy seemed to possess them for they neither glanced at us nor flinched from the cracking whip of a warder who ran beside them.

"Prisoners," said Cass, "and their crimes were but petty ones."

Clank-clank, shuffle . . . clank-clank, shuffle . . . The sound beat into the brain.

I turned and fled as fast as my shaky limbs could carry me, and when Cass caught me up I was leaning panting against the railings of Hotel du Commerce.

"Had enough?"

"You've deliberately shown me horror," I gasped. "I know the Chinese have no regard for death and are also cruel in their punishments, but you must admit"—here I had to swallow hard—"that there is a sort of rough justice about those prisoners. They are working out expiation of their crimes. Perhaps, too, it is our idea of cruelty that is wrong; not the Chinese idea at all."

"Almost," answered Cass dryly, "you are as logical as myself. If you feel able, let us walk on to the next street corner and see if we can find cruelty unconnected with rough justice."

Where our cobbled alleyway joined the main thoroughfare surged a cheering, gesticulating crowd. Peering over their shoulders we saw a man holding a big wicker cage in which was a huge rat. Beside him stood a boy with a bottle of petrol in one hand and a lighted taper in the other. Very carefully he dropped the spirit on to the wicker, setting alight to each drop, and around him the crowd swayed and shouted in ecstasy as the terrified rat threw its body from side to side of the cage in a

hopeless attempt to escape. The more frenzied its scrabbings the more the crowd roared, and when its fur began to smoulder there was a positive stampede forward to see the fun.

I pulled Cass's arm. "Take me away, I'm going to be sick."

He led me down the alleyway, his face sombre. "That is the favourite street corner entertainment in China."

In that instant he was very far removed from the gay dapper Frenchman I knew, but as I recovered from my feeling of nausea I said obstinately, "Only twenty-five years ago there were such insensate cruelties practised in Russia; look at her now? You cannot blame the Chinese; they have possessed a real leader, a definite social system for so short a time."

"Hooey!" said Cass elegantly. "Your Russians were a race of mystics, a melancholy people oppressed by a handful of aristocrats. Forced into introversion by tyranny, they worshipped ideals in their minds and so grew ripe for revolution. You can't compare the Chinese with the Russians—they have neither ideals nor mysticism to uphold them through travail, they are just sub-human."

I told him sharply that I disliked his arrogance; he retorted I had a bourgeois conception of life from which I could never escape and that bit deep for I knew it to be true, and long as I had struggled to subdue it I had never quite conquered it. "Anyway," I told him, "I can at least appreciate the superb philosophy of the Chinese."

"The what?"

"Philosophy."

"You talk through your hat. True philosophy is a quality of mind which draws its basis from the common life and idealism of a people, it's not a thing which stands solid and alone like a wardrobe. Well, there is no idealism, no life in China, only a sort of animal existence, so what have you?"

I said viciously, "A philosophy as solid and alone as a wardrobe, and nothing will make me deviate from that."

"You are tired," he answered gently, "but you talk an awful lot of nonsense about China because you persist in blowing pretty bubbles of illusion all around her. I've lived and worked too long in the country, *force majeure* I have grown as prickly as a Chinese cactus."

We drifted into Hotel de la Poste to tell Madame I should be

able to take my meals there from the morrow, and sipped our drinks in the company of the Generalissimo's foreign pilots, but as I listened to the conversation, which was all concerned with China's war, I still felt resentful against Cass and his devastating logic. Most of his adult life had been spent, I knew, in one or another of China's cities or in Indo-China, but why should he shut his eyes to her beauties, concentrate always on the other side of the medal? Suddenly I remembered the prisoners struggling with their chains, and nausea seized me once more.

"Don't you want to finish your drink?" said somebody.

I shook my head. China and pink gin simply didn't mix.

II

Joe had told me it never rained in Kunming, but for the next two days savage thunderstorms raged while the Generalissimo's pilots played crap and cursed the deplorable state of the flying-field. A grand lot they were, these airmen from all over the world—Britishers, Americans, Frenchmen, Swiss, Germans, Dutchmen, Russians—come to instruct the Chinese or to fly Army and Government officials. Most of them had been in Spain and Abyssinia or in obscure South American revolutions for the very smell of war lured them and, in another age, they would have been the best type of mercenary, men who loved fighting for fighting's sake.

But they bore a bitter grudge against their present inactivity. Having engaged them for specified purposes, the Chinese had indulged in the prevarication so dear to their hearts. There were no budding pilots requiring instruction at the moment, no generals or officials to be flown anywhere, during the rainy season the mud rendered the flying-fields useless; and when the pilots complained they were told with true Oriental courtesy, "Why grumble? You are handsomely paid in Hong Kong gold dollars each month, you have a nice easy life, you have long contracts with us?"

So the pilots went on playing crap—and eating their hearts out at the same time. All around them was war and they were not allowed to take part in it, because the truth was that Chiang

Kai-shek refused to emulate the example of his antagonists and use his foreign pilots for active service. To his strict reasoning such a course was tantamount to a violation of International Law.

"And we can't leave the damned country," M——, the German, informed me, "we can't even leave Kunming. We resign and they wave our contracts in our faces. Take my advice, don't stay too long in Kunming—every one goes nuts here."

"But why did Chiang Kai-shek ever employ you? He must have known from the beginning he was not going to use you for war purposes?"

"God in heaven, why does a Chinese ever do anything? Simply because he can't resist a bright new idea. In China the cart always goes before the horse. Only after the idea is turned into fact does the Chinese realize the hundred and one snags involved. I haven't flown since February—maybe I'll never fly again. Hell, let's put on another record," and he slouched across to the gramophone.

There was a whole cabinet of records; only two were used. One was "A little Dutch Boy, a little Dutch Girl in Haarlem" and the other "Don't cross your Fingers, cross your Heart," and their cloying, tinkling melodies formed a *leit motif* to life in Hotel de la Poste. They greeted you when you walked in in the morning, they accompanied your meals, they provided a background to conversation, they even, so rumour had it, disturbed the sleep of the godly, for those unable to woo slumber had the habit of descending in the early hours, writing their own chits behind the bar and playing the gramophone while they sipped their drinks.

Nobody minded; the pilots were entitled to all the amusement they could get, and as I grew to know them better I marvelled at their disdain of the inter-racial hatreds which must surely have existed between such men had they been confined together anywhere in Europe, for there was a complete lack of rancour, the Germans hob-nobbing with the French, Franco's Spaniards shooting dice with Soviet Russians, New Zealanders fraternizing with Americans.

Just occasionally anger would show sharp teeth, but such displays were of brief duration and were born of a combination of enforced idleness and Kunming's climate, for although the

Chinese extolled the equable weather of Yunnan's capital the city stood over 6,000 feet above sea-level, and continued existence at such an altitude, as I had already discovered elsewhere, sometimes plays curious tricks on Western peoples.

On the whole, therefore, they were a genial crowd and I developed a whole-hearted admiration for them, because hour after hour they would play games of "let's pretend" in order to evade the "nuts" which were wont to fall upon Kunming's foreign residents. W——, a tall American with the face of Adonäs, used to yarn about the woods of his native Maine. "I'm going to get me a little shack and live there the year round. Jesus, that's the life for a man, hunting, trapping, tree-felling, living just natural by the work of his own pair of hands. I guess I'll never tell when Maine is more beautiful, in the spring when the larch tassels swing so green in the wind, or in the fall when you run soft over the red and gold leaves."

As he paused somebody else would take up the tale, telling of the dark beauty of night in the African bush, the glamour of Paris on a winter's evening, the sun-kissed days of a Pacific island, the friendliness of Moscow city or the blazing loveliness of the flower-barges on the Amsterdam canals.

But M—— and I had a "let's pretend" game which drove the others to blind fury, for we would sit and croon in ecstasy while we planned menus culled from the foods we had eaten in different countries.

"Black bread, thickly spread fresh butter, great lumps of Astrakhan caviar."

(Here the Russians would yelp in unison.)

"But M——, think of asparagus soup, the kind you get in Holland?"

"No, no, Bortsch, but if you want something Dutch, why not their hors d'œuvres, fishy, sausagey and otherwise?"

(Here a Dutchman would simply weep into his whisky glass.)

Then we would become positively lyrical about the foods of Vienna, Prague, Paris, Rome, The Hague, Marseilles, Kiev, San Francisco, New York, Copenhagen, Budapesth and remind each other of exquisite dinners eaten in restaurants from Pernambuco to the Philippines, from Chicago to Rangoon. "The *wiener schnitzel* at Schöner's in the Siebensterngasse—ah, you can kiss your hand to that!" "Remember the *truffes sous la cendre* at

the Perigord?" "And the Restaurant des Trois Faisons at Dijon?" "Ah, but what about the grilled lobster at Capricieuse in Marseilles, or the stuffed cabbage at Horcher's in Berlin, or the *paprika hahn* in Budapesth?"

Having eaten, in retrospect, a hundred succulent meals we would come down with a bang to Kunming and Annamite cookery, in which each dish is masked in an oily, fishy sauce, while the others in desperation raided Madame's case of canned goods in an effort to find there something which would effectively put the taste of our discussion into their watering mouths.

I liked M——, I think, best of all the pilots. Slow and quiet, with a habit of screwing up his eyes when he smiled, he came from Westphalia, where his father was a landowner of some substance. Very early in life, however, M—— had taken to the air, and since his start with Lufthansa had travelled the skies with thoroughness. His knowledge of Hitler's Germany was deeper than he admitted, but while he said frankly that he considered the Führer had performed a miracle in restoring self-respect to a great race he wisely reserved any further opinion on the Nazi regime.

Political discussions of any kind, indeed, were rare in Hotel de la Poste. Each morning a typed French news-sheet arrived and was read with avidity, but ten minutes later the conversation had turned to the disused planes which lay rotting in their hangars, or to the state of the air-field, or—and this was most likely—to the little foibles of those foreigners who were staying in the city. There was the airman who, upon riding home to his apartment near Hotel du Lac after rather a hectic evening, had been beaten up by half a dozen rickshaw coolies; there was the Australian who had divorced his wife only to find her sitting waiting for him every time he put his nose inside the club; there was the mysterious and elegant Frenchman who arrived accompanied by two elderly and unprepossessing females, booked one room for the three of them and spent his time lying on the bed smoking opium while the lady friends quarrelled violently on the floor.

"*C'est la mentalité Française,*" murmured M—— dreamily; and for the first time in Kunming I saw tempers rise, because Georges seized a bottle from behind the bar and advanced threateningly. "*Et la mentalité Allemande?*" he demanded. "*Vous souvenez . . . ?*"

There followed an unrepeatable story about a German woman who had visited the city some time previously.

"Nuts," replied M— placidly. "Have a drink, Georges? Hey, Shtapka!"

Shtapka was, perhaps, the most astonishing thing in an astonishing place. He confessed to fourteen summers but was the size of an average seven-year-old in England; his nationality was Annamite and he combined the functions of waiter, house-boy, cook-boy and every other kind of boy in Hotel de la Poste; he spoke good French and a sort of Esperanto, and he wore always a long black satin coat several sizes too large, presented to him by M—.

"And I have had a wife these two years," he told me proudly.

"Nonsense, Shtapka."

"But it is true, Madame," protested Georges. "Shtapka, where is the photograph?"

A monstrous postcard was produced which showed Shtapka standing beside a husky and well-grown female who looked a good decade older than he did. "She lives in Tonkin, Madame, is she not beautiful? She is seventeen and we have a baby son."

"But we do not believe that bit," added Georges kindly.

I had the feeling Shtapka did not believe it either, for he rolled his eyes, laughed hugely and scuttled off to return with a small wooden box which he plopped at my feet. "The next air-raid I run," he announced. "Here are my possessions."

These consisted of a battered solar topee, two grimy shifts, a French novel, an ancient safety razor minus a blade, and a roll of dirty dollar bills comprising tips given him by the pilots, and when I recently read of a Japanese raid on Kunming I conjured up a picture of Shtapka legging it for freedom and Tonkin, the little box tucked firmly under his arm.

III

It was Cass who effectively destroyed my idle enjoyment of the pilots and Shtapka. He himself worked exceedingly hard, and on the third wet morning he said severely, "You are rested now. It is high time you saw something of the city. Oh, and you must have your hair cut, but be sure the hairdresser comes here to do it and allows you to sterilise his scissors because otherwise you run the risk of contracting some bad skin disease."

I answered "Yes" absent-mindedly and stood in the doorway looking out at the water-logged yard. But I was not thinking of Kunming so much as of Joe and the other Chinese friends I had so shamefully neglected. The postponement of our shopping expedition and similar appointments had been unavoidable, but for the past two and a half days I had simply drifted and had purposely pushed all thought of China and the Chinese out of my mind on the pretext that I was still tired, that I had seen too much tragedy already, that there was always to-morrow. Now I tried to comfort myself with M——'s reminder that every foreigner in Kunming went nuts sooner or later, but in my heart I knew that to be a false excuse. The truth was that my bourgeois mind relished this reversion to type, this ordinary existence wherein it could laugh and chatter and shoot dice, and recoiled from the idea of wrestling once more with the complexities of China's problems.

Abruptly I turned. "Shtapka, call me a rickshaw."

"The hairdresser," said Cass, "has his shop opposite the cinema. Ask him if he can come this afternoon."

"I know he lives opposite the cinema, but he can wait. I'm going to see the Chows." And for the first and last time in my life I faded out on Cass.

Joe, the dormouse and I greeted each other with the mirthful, consonantless cries of the Highway, nodded above our clasped hands and set forth for the shopping streets. The little hiatus in our friendship had not been and we were as happy as the tiny blue-birds which skimmed above our heads even in the middle of the city. In one shop they showed us rolls of embroidered silk and I, forgetful of the rich coats out of China promised to various relatives and friends, and also of the fact I had precious

few dollars to spare, ran riot. There was a square of satin in deep dark blue which boasted the dragon, the spider, the snake and the rat of the Chinese zodiac; there was another square in tissue-thin *crêpe-de-chine* that enthralled me by the richness of its pattern; there was a symphony in blue and gold which cried out to be purchased, but when Joe added up the sum total I stood transfixed with horror.

"Come along," said Mrs. Chow, and I followed her out on to the pavement. "In five or ten minutes Chow will have bargained with the seller and you will have your silk." Then she sighed, "Everything so dear in Kunming; before the war it was so different."

We cracked melon seeds and paid no heed to the appalling noise going on between Joe and the shopkeeper because we were very Chinese ladies waiting for a very Chinese gentleman, and eventually he emerged triumphant with two out of the three squares on which I had set my heart. "But if you were not from the impatient West," he informed me severely, "we could dally an hour and buy these for thirty dollars instead of fifty."

"But it is only right," added the dormouse decidedly, "that foreigners should pay more than we do. Now Bigland wants some of those lacquer cigarette-cases they make in Foochow."

We trailed up and down Kunming's many streets, buying ridiculous things which caught our fancy. A realistic bear jumping on a piece of elastic, two cocks with rainbow-hued plumage which fought most realistically, tiny pagoda-decorated boxes that fitted one inside the other, Russian fashion, sticks of candy and Army badges for the Filipino who had chosen John Shiel for a name because it was so Scottish.

"Jade," said Mrs. Chow suddenly. "It is expensive now that the war has killed the trade in it, but you must have some pieces."

Our efforts in jade were not so successful. The aged man who sold it had fabulous prices marked up in his window and proved a difficult person with whom to haggle. "Three hundred and fifty dollar!" he shrieked while twirling a bangle, and Mrs. Chow answered him in raucous Cantonese, whereupon he flung his entire stock into the street and condemned the damned foreigners who made a burden of his and everybody else's life.

I grew nervous: fortunately the Chows and the dormouse

were case-hardened to this particular form of Chinese temperament. Picking up odd bits of jade they made fantastically low offers for them which, to my surprise, were accepted, the old man bowing low and thanking his gracious customers for their courtesy in saving his stock from the heavy feet of passers-by.

But of the lacquer cigarette-cases of Foochow there was no sign, and although I bought perfectly carved jade figures, pieces of glowing amber, shining silks and pictures of lakes exactly like Er-Hai, I yet hankered after those cases with the result that we tramped steadily in and out of half a hundred shops, and I eventually called a halt in an eating-house which sold green tea and pleasant, crunchy cakes of rice flour.

"Such a lovely day," sighed the nibbling dormouse. "After this we go to dine with Bigland—ah, do you remember the butcher of Lungling?"

"And Miau with his statistics?"

"And 'poor darling' when he had fever near Yangpih?"

Joe leaned back against the counter. "To-morrow you must pay your respects to Director Tan of the Yunnan-Burma Highway and ask his permission for your return passage."

I had forgotten Hotel de la Poste, the pilots, the Calmette rose-garden—most of all I had forgotten Cass. Spitting with exactitude into a sawdust sprinkled corner, I said it would be an honour to interview Director Tan. "And perhaps Ching will drive me back to Lashio," I added dreamily. "But first I must go to Chungking."

There was a short silence. "And why?" demanded the dormouse, "do you not like Kunming?"

"But I do. It just seems important to see your capital."

The Chows sighed deeply. "The road to Chungking is so very bad and you will have to travel in an old bus not at all resembling the luxurious one in which you travelled the Highway. You must understand that the local buses journey very slowly, break down very frequently and are not serviced owing to the war."

The dormouse crunched another cake. "And the road, of course," she said thoughtfully, "is not nearly so good."

"Seven days in the dry weather," remarked Joe as he poured himself a second bowl of tea. "But with the rains it may take three, four weeks—who knows?"

Memories assailed me. If you took three days to travel thirty-six kilometres . . . ? Valiantly I spat again. "Road or no road, I'm going to Chungking."

Joe crashed his tea-bowl on to the counter. "I always said Bigland would achieve the Chinese view of death!"

We wandered out into a street lit with round yellow lanterns and padded towards the market-place. Very kind was the appearance of the city in the dusk, and all around us moved ghostly Chinese figures in their long blue coats. We did not take rickshaws because members of the New Life Movement practised economy in war-time, but drifted with the crowds, stopping every few minutes to admire a shop window, while beside us time also drifted as gently as it had always done in China.

Children squatted in the deep gutters making mud-pies; tiny withered women strutted by on their tightly bound feet; men in European dress rubbed shoulders with coolies in native dress; from the doorways floated the scents of tea and incense and spices. To-morrow death might rain from the skies—but to-morrow was another day and for this evening the people of Kunming were safe in the knowledge that no Japanese plane would risk a journey of 600 miles over bad flying country in the darkness.

In the market we bought red and golden lilies, masses of dahlias, tight bunches of spiky gladioli; and in a mysterious wholesale emporium unearthed by Joe I purchased ten tins of duty-free cigarettes with beautiful pictures of river-pirates on them. Mrs. Chow introduced me to a chemist who actually sold tooth-paste, and the dormouse insisted upon buying cheap rouge and powder with which she and Mrs. Chow adorned their faces despite my protests.

"You have such lovely skins; why ruin them?"

"Ah, but we are in the city now. Bigland, lend me your mirror from your bag. See how exquisite that touch of scarlet is on the cheek-bone?"

I thought it revolting and said so, adding nastily that I could not conceive of the New Life Movement approving such goings-on.

"It is necessary," they said reprovingly, "for women to beautify themselves in war-time."

Not for the first time I thought of the New Life Movement

as a sort of scarecrow moved at will from one part of a field to another; but the glamour of Kunming was upon me as we moved slowly down the long road leading to the railway and turned into the cobbled lane, and it was only when we entered Hotel de la Poste that I realized a vague tension in the atmosphere.

It was intangible, horrible, menacing in its suddenness. Joe's nephew—a man nearly as old as himself—was waiting for us, so I introduced every one to my Western friends and we all sat down in apparent amity. But the normally casual pilots had developed a devastating politeness, and Mrs. Chow and the dormouse were dumb, and Joe and the nephew accepted whiskies and sodas which made them splutter, and Cass infuriated me by his stiff series of bows. Altogether it was an uncomfortable evening. Madame had taken endless pains to cook us a really pleasant meal, but the Chinese picked awkwardly at each dish with their forks and by the expressions on their faces I knew perfectly well they swallowed the "foreign food" with difficulty. An excellent Burgundy was sampled by nobody except myself, after the chicken the floor was strewn with small pieces of bone, our conversation was as stilted as though we were dining with all Victoriana.

"Beautiful peaches," said Joe politely.

"But then Yunnan is famous for its perfect fruit," I answered inanely.

The friendship born on the Highway and fostered only that afternoon in Kunming dwindled to a pitiful, twisted thing not unlike the body of the surveyor who had died first of our little nigger boys, and no matter how hard I tried to breathe life into it again it still lay there, grotesque and inanimate.

Nine o'clock struck and my guests rose automatically from table. Convention forbade them to depart for another half hour, so we walked back into the lounge and I tried desperately to interest them in the two available entertainments, crap and the gramophone.

"The tunes have no music," said the dormouse, and her English held a twang I had never before perceived.

"What a silly game," remarked Joe's nephew.

"And why put the grains in the coffee so that one must wait until all the liquid sinks into the lower glass? demanded Mrs. Chow, as she regarded her *café filtre*."

The agonising half-hour dragged to an end. My guests bowed courteous good-byes and Ike, an American who already knew Joe, asked them and myself to dine with him the following evening. To my surprise they accepted with every show of pleasure, yet I had asked Ike and a New Zealand friend of his to dine with us and while Joe and nephew were spluttering over their whiskies they had calmly announced they'd rather go on shooting dice! But the Chinese, of course, were the Chinese—one encouraged or dismissed them at will.

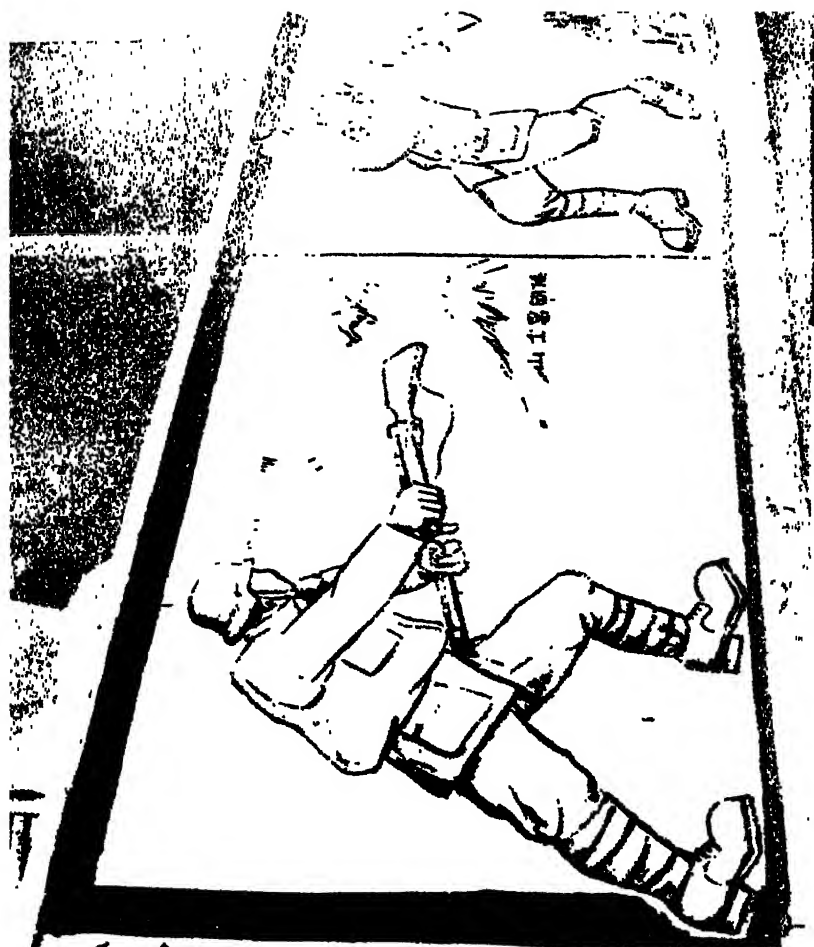
"We thank you so much for your hospitality," my guests said as we crossed the courtyard, and as Joe shook my hand he whispered, "Now you must join your friends at their funny game; I know you wish to do so."

He was wrong. I was out of tune with the pilots. I went for a walk alone under an indigo sky, across which flashed summer lightning and my thoughts were bitter ones. Why had this awful barrier between the Chinese and myself arisen? Did it exist only in my brain or was it real? How was it that everybody else—and people who knew China so much better than I did at that—treated the Chinese as rather pleasant performing animals? Was it just myself in my madness who fought a worthless battle against racial prejudice? Maybe that last bit was right; not so long ago an eminent critic back in England had thanked me with finished sarcasm for shouldering the black man's burdens, and now I was shouldering those of the Chinese with every bit as much enthusiasm—which was damn' silly.

Or was it? Shouldn't it be the duty of every person who had taken kindness from a people, travelled with them, grown to love them, to help fight the battles of that people with every weapon in the curious armoury of Western words?

But I was always wrong: my mistakes showed up against the dark sky like the flaring posters put out by the Generalissimo exhorting the disinterested Yunnanese to join China's Army, and I didn't care but marched on pondering the extraordinary mass of contradictions which was Kunming, wishing passionately that every European of sensibility could be transported across the Highway in open trucks during the rainy season.

To north, south and east men were fighting that China might fulfil her destiny; here there was brief peace until the



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cessation of the rains offered opportunity for frequent and deadly air-raids, and when the curtain dropped on this truly marvellous interlude of provincial Government pulling snooks at Chiang Kai-shek, what then? Nothing but bodies blown to pieces and the other nations of the world raking in the shekels. Surely the true starkness of war had never been displayed more clearly than in this Sino-Japanese conflict?

"You're so silly," said my mind. "Out of a personal incident you create a world conflagration;" and I answered my second man, "No, I don't. Out of European indifference to my Chinese friends springs the struggle for freedom which will dominate the earth some day very soon."

So silly to say that international indifference could further world peace and yet, in China, an innately sane idea. Somewhere the shade of Miao shouted, "We are an orthodox nation!"; beside me a lorry lumbered past, the lightning glinting on the bayonet of a soldier standing in the cab; a little Chinese girl wept sadly because her brother had been killed at the Front; two rickshaw coolies had a fight over sixty cents and on the far side of the street . . .? oh, well, everything in seven kinds of hell was happening on the far side of the street.

I swung into the yard and Cass stood, a dim figure fairly near to me. "Have you conquered your devils?"

"No. I would rather keep them than behave as you and your kind have done to-night. But then, the sensibility of the oldest race known eludes you, doesn't it? The Chinese women are good bed-mates, that is all."

"Not so good, a necessity; and often one may sleep with a person yet refrain from eating with her. Your supreme convictions, my dear, are very wearing. Four weeks, is it, you have been in China?"

From the bar the radio, usually blocked by weather or more sinister conditions, blared forth: "There will be trouble over Tientsin and the Chinese are very sore about the proposed Tokyo agreement. . . . The fighting on the Mongolian border is the heaviest known since the Great War. . . . The Russians have brought down seven Japanese airplanes. . . . Somebody has fired at the Führer's car. . . ."

There was a loud crackle and the announcer's voice stopped. "World news in a nutshell," murmured Cass. "But to go
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back to our mutttons: your heroic *personal* championship of the Chinese bores me stiff, but I applaud you because you have the larger vision which realizes that China's war has more ultimate significance than any other war on earth. Very soon now the European situation will boil over, yet although that will be our war and this is not, we shall not lose sight of the immensity of China's struggle, for we shall know that the final issue of world war or peace must be decided here in Asia."

He tucked his arm under mine and led me indoors. The pilots were still playing crap and the gramophone ground out, "Don't cross your Fingers, cross your Heart", and Shtapka dashed to and fro bearing trays of drinks. People argued about Hong-Kong and Singapore, W—— a little tipsy, put his feet on a table and sang about the woods of Maine, Ike and the New Zealander were discussing airplanes made from soya.

M—— jogged my elbow. "What are you dreaming about? Three times I have asked you how the Croats prepare stuffed gherkins?"

"Sorry." I looked across at Cass, who was perched on a bar stool flirting outrageously with Madame. "I was just thinking that the cactus always flowers."

"Nuts!" He regarded me out of screwed up eyes, then strolled to the gramophone. "Kunming is getting you down. Let's have a cheerful tune." He lifted the needle and changed the record. Through the smoky room floated the story of "A little Dutch Boy, a little Dutch Girl in Haarlem".

IV

I said to Madame: "Would you have the great kindness to telephone to the hairdresser and make an appointment with him to come here this afternoon? I wish my hair cut, washed and set."

Madame said: "As one woman to another, Mme. Bigland, how can I exist any longer in this terrible exile? Nineteen years I have lived here in Yunnanfou with these dogs of Chinese. What have I won for all my sacrifice? Absolutely nothing! My savings have gone, Monsieur is very sick and moans for Hanoi—all very well for him to contemplate a sojourn in that gay city

when I have to pay for it, Georges is possessed of a devil. Shtapka, Shtapka, for God's sake shut the door of the *frigidaire*! Ah, no, Madame, I have no telephone but . . ."

Monsieur said: "One hails a *pousse-pousse*; one instructs the driver to take one so far as the great arch over the main street—not the first main street nor yet the second, but the third and then," he twirled his moustaches with effect, "*En face de cinema*! That, however, is a small affair compared with what I suffer. Why, my belly feels as though weighted down—a tumour I feel sure, and never will it be cured until I see again the Rue Paul Bert in Hanoi."

Georges said: "Lazy old man! The truth is, Madame, he has a ladylove in Hanoi. I work my fingers to the bone so that he may skip like an old goat!"

"No, you don't," screamed Madame, "idle, good-for-nothing that you are! Get out of my sight and do not dare return!"

The gramophone wailed: "*With your head upon my shoulder, Never mind if we grow older, Don't cross your Fingers, cross your Heart . . .*"

I dodged a beer bottle and walked over to the Old Post Office across the alleyway, where six Chinese sat for some obscure reason at six little windows and shrieked anathema at an inquiring populace.

"May I telephone from here, please?"

The face I addressed looked startled. "Old Post Office, no telephone. New Post Office miles away!"

I hailed a rickshaw, trying to remember Monsieur's instructions. "Cinema!"

The coolie grunted and spat. Seating myself in the vehicle I directed him by pointing hopefully at the numerous arches across Kunming's main streets, but he grew tired of my effort and suddenly broke into a gallop from which he did not desist until we had traversed a number of slummy thoroughfares full of rotting refuse and thousands of smells.

"Back, back!" I prodded him between the shoulders. He turned, glared malevolently and held out his hand. I gave him a dollar and we trundled through the slums once more until I saw "*Banque de l'Indo-Chine*" written above a doorway. Here surely was haven, but surprisingly enough not one clerk spoke French or English. Suddenly somebody clasped my arm and I

turned to behold Ching, very correctly garbed in black tunic and trousers. "Bigland," he beamed, "Chow!"

"Cinema," I beamed back.

The bank clerks were slightly intrigued by the rapturous way in which we hugged each other's wrists—they knew nothing of the bond forged between the travellers of the Highway, but I had lost interest in their stuffy office with its stuffier grilles and dragged Ching out on to the pavement. "Cinema?"

"Chow! Wei!"

"No, no, not at the moment. Look!" While half Kunming pressed around us I performed a complicated piece of mime, describing (*a*) a visit to a cinema and (*b*) a visit to a hairdresser. As a street act it evidently had points, for the people crowed and clapped and cat-called, Ching held his sides, rocking with laughter even the rickshaw coolie forbore to moan the word "dollar" and capered up and down between the shafts; but as a guide to Kunming it was worthless.

Recovering, Ching gasped out. "Chow! Wei!"

"NO!"

His beatific smile returned. "Moonkeys, *fan*," he remarked cheerfully.

I paid off the coolie, took Ching by the hand and led him along the street to a large shop selling a queer assortment of carpets, wireless sets and agricultural implements. Marching within I asked boldly, in English and French, if anybody spoke either language. "But yes!" shouted a small man in the latter tongue. Producing a card he presented it to me with a flourish. "Wong Han-min," I read, "Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer of China."

Feeling a little foolish I explained my errand. "Ah," he smiled, "but Kunming has *two* cinemas. Never mind, we will find the shop you want—it will be my pleasure to escort you. Is it not strange you should find me, a professional cinematograph operator, when you desire the cinema?"

Ching burst into Mandarin speech. "He says," translated Mr. Wong, "that he wants the address of Mr. Chow of China Travel Service since the lady who is staying at that gentleman's home has three dirty shirts of his in her basket."

I remembered then that we had used the dormouse's fruit basket latterly as a dumping ground for soiled and sodden clothing, so fished out Joe's address. "He also says," and Mr.

Wong's voice was faintly doubtful, "that he and two monkeys wish to make an appointment to meet you to-morrow in the Yunnan-Burma Highway depot."

"Tell him, please," I replied grandly, "that it will be a great pleasure to meet him to-morrow at three o'clock."

Poor Mr. Wong, I don't think he ever got over that appointment or the warm farewell between Ching and myself. As we walked through the market he said gently, "It is most interesting to me to meet an Englishwoman, but I scarcely thought she would show friendship for a coolie. And these monkeys?"

I explained as best I could, and we threaded our way down a crowded street to a large and derelict building. "Our leading cinema," he announced, "as you see from my name-card I represent Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's Agency in Kunming. Marvellous pictures they send us! This week, however, we have *Rossignol*, the very latest film made by our friends the Soviets."

I blinked up at a grimy poster. *Rossignol* was an ancient friend of mine. "But I saw this three years ago in Moscow."

Mr. Wong did not believe me. Indeed, he grew quite dramatic about it and assured me I must have been mistaken. "We do not resemble other Far Eastern cities; we always have up-to-the-minute films."

The important thing, however, was to find the hairdresser's shop and eventually we unearthed it tucked away round a corner. "Three men are being shaved, impossible for a lady to enter, allow me," said Mr. Wong, and dived within. Presently he emerged and informed me that "a huge Frenchman" had called and ordered the hairdresser to Hotel de la Poste. "If you hurry back doubtless he will be there waiting for you."

I grinned. Evidently Georges had also dodged the beer bottle.

With pomp Mr. Wong hailed a rickshaw, gave the coolie directions and bowed deeply. "I will take the liberty of calling upon you at two o'clock to enquire if the hairdresser awaited you satisfactorily."

I found peace restored behind the bar; but no hairdresser. "He could not wait, Madame, he had several Chinese ladies to attend to, and although I told him to leave such scum and attend to Madame, he refused to do so."

I sank into a chair. "Is he coming back?"

"God knows, Madame," returned Shtapka piously.

Cass came in. "Haven't you had your hair done yet?"

I regarded him icily. "The hour is now noon. Since nine-thirty this morning I have been scouring this city for the hairdresser. I am hot, tired and dusty. My hair may grow as bushy as Abraham's beard—I don't care."

"*C'est la mentalité Anglaise*," murmured M——

But I hadn't heard the last of that hairdresser.

In the middle of luncheon Mr. Wong arrived, looking very harassed. In the blazing sun the kind creature had tramped back to the hairdresser and renewed my appointment. "He will be here before two," he told me.

I waited until three and set off, late and ill-tempered, for the Yunnan-Burma Highway depot to meet Director Tan Ling-po. In an ante-room Joe was dancing with impatience. "Fifteen minutes late and Director Tan so important! Listen, he has studied in Germany and that is the only foreign country he likes. Put your hat straight and some powder on your nose, Bigland—he is the only person who can give you a return pass along the Highway."

I remembered the permit official at Pao Shan and felt grim. "Well, come along. You can do the talking."

Joe backed away. "Oh, no, the interview is personal. I wait outside."

In no equable frame of mind, therefore, did I face the man who sat in a cool dim room filled with greenish light that filtered through Venetian blinds. He greeted me courteously; then he said, "I regret you had such a long journey."

"Not at all, I enjoyed it immensely and found it most interesting."

"And you desire to make the return journey?"

The words were polite; the tone held a defensive something which made me prick up my ears. The Chinese never broke their word; if they promised you a thing they stuck to their bond through all manner of difficulties. But Director Tan had, I felt sure, already made up his mind not to promise me anything, and he was taking refuge behind the far-famed inscrutability of his race, which I had once denounced to Joe. All right, ran my vainglorious thought, he isn't dealing with someone wholly English.

"As you know, Director, I have travelled to China in order to write a book, and your Highway is my theme. Certainly I intend visiting Schezwan province and perhaps Shansi, but it is obvious that a return journey across the Highway would be of much value to me. I understand that it may be a time before the new Stewart buses are ready to take the road again, but there are the ordinary town to town buses in which I should be happy to book a passage."

We sipped bowls of green tea and regarded each other dreamily across the desk.

"Have you ever," and his voice was hypnotic in its softness, "visited Indo-Chine? The French are allies of your people and there is an excellent railroad service to Hanoi—or air-service. By all accounts you enjoy air travel?"

I did not see this one phlegmatic figure; I saw Chinamen throughout the ages ranged up against a Western civilization which had betrayed them more than once. I said: "Do you fear what I shall write about your Highway?"

"It is a military road, but that has no significance. The truth is we are closing it to all non-essential traffic until the rainy season is over."

A military road—the rest was bunkum. Despite countless landslides and torrential rains one hundred trucks a day could still pass over the Highway. The memory of "all the fun in the world" firm in my mind I said: "May I please book a passage as far as Pao Shan?"

"The buses are so crowded. Our Government would not like you to experience uncomfortable conditions. If you could wait until October?"

I waved October and China aside. "You studied in Germany, I believe?"

"In Saxony, at Leipzig."

Did a flicker of expression lighten his features? Quickly I talked of Augustusplatz, of the "Bugra" or "Book Fair", of the Gewandthaus and the Thomanerchor.

"Ah," interrupted Director Tan, "have you drunk *Gose* in the inns of Eutrisch?"

We actually smiled at each other then; but in a moment he rose and held out his hand. "If I were you I should try to arrange an air or train passage down to Indo-Chine."

In the ante-room I said to Joe: "It's no good, he doesn't want me to go back by the Highway—but I'm going."

"Ah," he nodded portentously, "He has his reasons."

My simmering temper boiled over. "Well, why can't he say what he means?"

"You do not understand, Bigland, it is all so difficult . . ."

Just then Director Tan poked his head round the curtain which covered the doorway. "I feel sure you would be interested to know," he addressed me, "that we have ordered three million pounds' worth of cement from Burma for the Highway."

What was cement to me or I to cement? Pounding down the stairs I beckoned a rickshaw while Joe howled imprecations at me from the pavement. "I will poison you to-night at Ike's dinner. Always this argument, oh bad one! I will scatter melon seeds in your soup."

We began to giggle then, and Joe staggered across and patted me on the shoulder. "Ching and I will carry you to Pao Shan by chair," he said soothingly, "but September will do, I am very busy until that month."

Bowling homewards, however, my thoughts were sombre. I really was rather worried. Despite the kindness of the Government in granting me a free pass across the Highway incidental expenses had been high, and in Kunming the average hotel charge for a foreigner was nine or ten *piastres* a day, one Indo-China *piastre* being roughly ten French francs. Somehow I had to reach Chungking. The return bus fare would be almost a hundred dollars and I might also have to pay my board and lodgings for many weary weeks, whereas if I achieved an air passage by C.N.A.C. or Eurasia the return would cost me five hundred dollars. After all that I might just wobble back to Rangoon by Hanoi and Siam but unless I was reasonably sure of doing the long journey fairly quickly the thought of money was going to niggle at me all the time.

China, I reflected as I dismissed the coolie outside the hotel, was easy enough to get into—what about getting out?

The bar was empty. Glancing at the clock I saw the time was five p.m. Ike's dinner party was not until seven-thirty. Basely I beckoned Shtapka. "I can smell something: is it boiling corn?"

He grinned, rushed off and returned with two steaming cobs. I bought a small tin of butter and prepared to enjoy myself, but

just as I started to play a tune on the first cob a curious sound from the courtyard assailed my ears. Walking to the inner door I threw it open; sitting comfortably in a chair, one of my cotton frocks draped about his neck, was M—— and behind him hovered my missing hairdresser armed with a pair of scissors.

It was too much. I swore violently in Russian; he replied in German that he too had travelled the Trans-Siberian railway; Shtapka—wise child—snatched chair, frock and hairdresser and swept the lot upstairs into a vacant bedroom; the rest of the pilots gathered on the balcony demanding to know why their afternoon slumbers had been disturbed. I pointed to M—— and fled after Shtapka.

"Tell this man I wish my hair washed, cut and set."

Annamite filled the bedroom. The hairdresser scratched his head with my comb and looked vacant. "Also," I directed Shtapka, "fetch me a bottle of rice spirit so that the hairdresser may sterilize his scissors. I shall return in a moment."

Running downstairs I found M—— and W——, feet on a table, enjoying my mealies. That was the last straw! Running up them again I found the hairdresser affixing a fearful contraption to the electric light flex in the bathroom. "Shtapka, tell him not a permanent wave, I have one already."

The hairdresser waxed tempermental. Opening a large Gladstone bag he hurled brushes, curlers, shampoos and irons to the floor, groaning as he did so.

"Madame," wailed Shtapka, "I cannot make him understand. I fear you must submit to the wave eternal."

I did not blame him for fading out at this point. It was simply impossible to argue with that Chinese hairdresser. I poured the rice spirit into a bowl and he drank the lot. I pointed to the remains of wave on top of my head and he seized a gigantic pair of scissors and ran them in a jagged line around my scalp. I stamped my feet and shouted in the consonantless language of the Highway and he retaliated with an oration in Cantonese. Exhausted, I dumped myself in the chair and closed my eyes to torture. He could eternally wave me; he could do what he pleased. By to-morrow I should have all the skin complaints in China—what of it?

He took me by the neck and held my head over the basin, but when he anointed me with some foul-smelling shampoo an

awful thought brought me back to reality. With the full strength of my lungs I yelled for Shtapka. "Ask him how much this is going to cost?"

"Ten dollars, Madame."

Mutely I bent my head. It wasn't every day I achieved a permanent wave for ten times sevenpence halfpenny.

By seven o'clock I was beginning to like that hairdresser. As a rule his breed were horridly chatty; since he could not converse with me the progress of his task was extraordinarily peaceful. True, he spat accurately into the basin from behind my head, cut my hair at astonishing angles and burnt a large lock from above the left ear, but surprisingly enough he knew his job and by the time he had breathed heavily over setting my hair I felt both refreshed and rejuvenated. He then, however, turned his back and began packing his things up in the Gladstone bag. Once again I called Shtapka. "Ask him where the drier is?"

That was easy; there was no drier. "In China, Madame, he says the ladies like their hair left wet. It is really because the Provincial Government make strict laws about hairdressers using the electric lights. The eternal wave they approve of; the drying, no."

Water trickled down the back of my neck. I handed the Chinese twelve dollars instead of ten, whereupon he sat down on the edge of the bed and regarded me raptly.

"Shtapka, tell him he can go."

"He does not wish to do so, Madame. He has never seen a European lady before, he is interested."

I had exactly twenty minutes in which to change and reach Hotel du Commerce. "Bring up my bag," I told Shtapka. When it arrived I placed it in the bathroom, drew the curtain between that and the bedroom and advanced on the hairdresser. "You stay here," I pointed with vehemence to the bed and gave him a cigarette.

He was still there when I emerged, bathed and changed; and my hair still dripped down my neck. Pointing to the embroidered sleeves of my frock he rolled his eyes ecstatically. "He says," breathed the indefatigable Shtapka, "he will return you your twelve dollars if you will give him your dress."

I said vindictively, "Monsieur M—— gave you your coat.

Take the hairdresser to him to finish his hair and perhaps he will give him a dress like this one."

V

Ike was such a genial host that I promptly forgave him for his previous sins of omission regarding the Chinese. We dined in a private room and the New Zealander, who had lived in China over thirty years, carried on a conversation in faultless Mandarin with the Chows and the dormouse while I talked to Ike.

"I want to go to Rangoon next week," he said, "or maybe in a fortnight's time. How about your joining me in my Ford?"

It was a grand idea. Ike represented one of the big foreign oil companies and could get plenty of petrol; but remembering the state of the Highway I felt doubtful whether a Ford would ever manoeuvre certain stretches. Suddenly I said: "Director Fang of Pao Shan can take us from there to Lashio in his Horch. That is by far the worst bit of the journey."

"Here, you send your pal a wire first thing in the morning. Now see here, suppose we take enough juice to last us to Pao Shan, a case of canned foods, another case of liquor, spare parts and . . ."

Having scribbled down our vast number of requirements we discovered there would never be room left for ourselves.

"I know," I remarked rashly, "I'll see Director Tan again and ask if he can take some of our baggage in a Yunnan-Burma lorry."

By the time we had cut down our probable consumption of liquor from a case-full to one half-bottle of brandy, decided we could do without a boy and severely rationed our petrol supply we were in the highest spirits. "But none of those lousy guest-houses," warned Ike. "We sleep in the car."

Joe turned his head. I kicked Ike under the table and we began to talk very loudly about the road to Chungking.

As usual, the Chows left early, but when I tried to join them the New Zealander pushed me back into my chair. "You stay here, we want to discuss Far Eastern defences."

My hair had dried; I was comfortably weary. For the next

two hours my companions fought stupendous battles, raised Empires and crashed them to the ground, policed the Pacific and made Utopia out of the Philippines. Singapore, Hong Kong, Sourabaya, Manila, Sydney, the names penetrated dimly to my brain but it took Cass's voice to rouse me to full consciousness. "Your hair looks much better—and do you know it is almost midnight?"

Sleepily I bade the others good-night and we walked up the alleyway to the Calmette. Dark figures shuffled past us, the light from a lantern fell on the drooping shoulders of a beggar who slept with his back against the wall, from across the street came the hideous bray of the donkey that disturbed our nightly rest, towards me drifted the musky, subtle smell of a Chinese city. Around us almost a quarter of million people snatched brief respite from war, toil and starvation.

We turned in under an archway where clustered the usual hangers-on of the sanatorium; door-keepers, patients, beggars, and through the gardens flitted a little Chinese nurse out for a breath of air. She greeted us demurely, clasping her tiny hands and bobbing up and down so that her long white coat swirled about her feet like a balloon. Bobby, an Irish setter rescued by Cass from a miserable existence among swarms of pi-dogs, bounded forward and wagged his tail. Mechanically I patted him, then leaned against the door-post while Cass tidied rooms, tucked in mosquito nets, performed the small chores his meticulous mind insisted must be done each night. I seemed to have lived for a long time in this cool hospital and I wanted to go on living here . . .

"What did you talk about this evening?" asked Cass.

"British, French and American Far Eastern policy, the anti-comintern pact—oh, I don't know, I was half asleep."

"Because they did not speak of China? You forget how long they have lived in the country, forget also what an important effect upon her future the actions of the Great Powers must have."

How eminently reasonable Cass was! But I could not argue with that diamond-bright mind; instead I went to sleep and dreamed I was being paddled across Kunming lake by one of the golden-bodied girls who had boats there for hire. The water was blue and crystal-clear, the far hills guarding the eastern horizon gleamed amethyst in the sunlight, a little wind caught the girl's

robe and blew it back against her strong slender limbs, my hands were full of the pink-tipped lotus flowers that starred the shallows of the lake. The girl began to sing and behind her low, wordless chant came the soft splashing of the paddle and I thought how rarely exquisite was the beauty of this China.

I awakened with a start to find the room filled with the greyish light which presages the dawn. From across the rose-garden sounded a curious noise. Clank . . . clank . . . shuffle. Clank . . . clank . . . shuffle. The prisoners were going to their daily task.

Chapter Eleven

WHITE IS THE COLOUR OF SORROW

I

THE dormouse sat dejectedly on the edge of a chair, her eyes red with weeping, her pretty small face swollen out of recognition. "My brother," she moaned, "my favourite brother. Every night I have prayed he might not fall in battle, but I feel now that would not have been so hard to bear as this terrible end. Think, Bigland, to be travelling here to meet me and for the train to be bombed!"

Awkwardly I tried to comfort her. There was so little I could say or do and my mind went back to the night in Lashio *dak* bungalow when she had told me of her family. "*He is my favourite amongst our large family and I have not seen him for seven years. Think of our meeting; will it not be exciting?*"

Now there would be no meeting, no reward for the prayers, the letters, the hundred and one sacrifices of this loyal sister, for while she had been travelling across the Highway the brother had been appointed lecturer in economics to a Chinese University when it reopened for the autumn term. Deciding that such grand news could not wait he had set out to greet her with it in Kunming, but a Japanese bomb had fallen on his crowded train, blowing him and a score of fellow-countrymen to pieces.

Watching poor dormouse weeping so soundlessly, so hopelessly, I thought of what this one family had suffered through China's war. Their home near Canton was gone, their money had vanished, the husbands of the other sisters had been killed or mutilated—and now this Benjamin, this flower of the flock, had been taken.

She looked up at me out of tragic eyes. "Will you help me? I *must* reach my mother in Hong Kong as quickly as possible. You have the European friends here, can one of them get me a visa for Indo-China? If I can reach Hanoi, then I can take ship from there."

"Anything I can do, Shan Ling Ngai, shall be done. Give me your passport."

"I have no passport, that is why the French will not issue me a visa for Indo-China."

"But you must have some papers, dormouse. I mean, you went from Hong Kong to Rangoon. How did you enter Burma without a pass?"

"Special facilities for Chinese school-teachers," she drooled, and wept again, rocking herself to and fro in wretchedness.

I turned to Joe who sat, looking the picture of misery, on another chair. He too was weeping, the tears spurring slowly from behind his spectacles. "Look here, it is not a bit of good my asking for the dormouse's visa when she has no passport on which to stamp it. Hasn't she any papers at all?"

"Chinese do not use the passports," he murmured, "No necessity for such formalities. Poor, poor dormouse, what shall we do?"

I beckoned him to follow me and walked outside. "You are in China Travel Service and Kunming is a Chinese city. Surely you can help with her visa better than I can?"

He looked more doleful than before. "She will have to travel by the Michelin and she will have all her baggage stolen. The complaints we receive from the railway passengers! Only a few months ago there was an American missionary who lost . . ."

"Never mind that," I snapped. "The dormouse had planned to travel from here to Hong Kong long before her brother was killed. How did you think she would make the journey?"

He made a helpless gesture. "There would have been no hurry," he said vaguely, "something could have been arranged. Now my wife is sick with sorrow also; we can do nothing, nothing!"

Exasperated I marched back to the dormouse and extracted from her a crumpled letter officially appointing her as principal of the Yuck Luck Chinese Girls' School which seemed to be the only document of any kind in her possession. "Leave this with me and I will do what I can. Come back this afternoon about four o'clock."

Obediently she rose. Her pale blue robe was creased and tear-stained. "Oh, Bigland, you will *make* them grant me a visa?"

"I'll try," I replied.

When she and Joe had departed, one of the Russian pilots came and sat beside me. "Always they cry, these Chinese. It is so silly, besides it makes such a mess of the cushions." Savagely he shook up the damp object left in dormouse's chair.

"Her brother has just been killed," I explained; but he answered that one Chinese more or less made no difference and started the gramophone, while I wondered exactly why I, a foreigner, should be regarded by the Chinese as a passport magician. Considering that Joe was a high official in the Government Travel Agency the thing seemed wholly absurd; however, when Cass came in I tackled him.

Joe had been at his most Oriental: Cass was at his most Gallic. "And is she pretty, this little Chinese girl?"

I could have shaken him. "She is my friend, the one I told you about who came from Lashio with me."

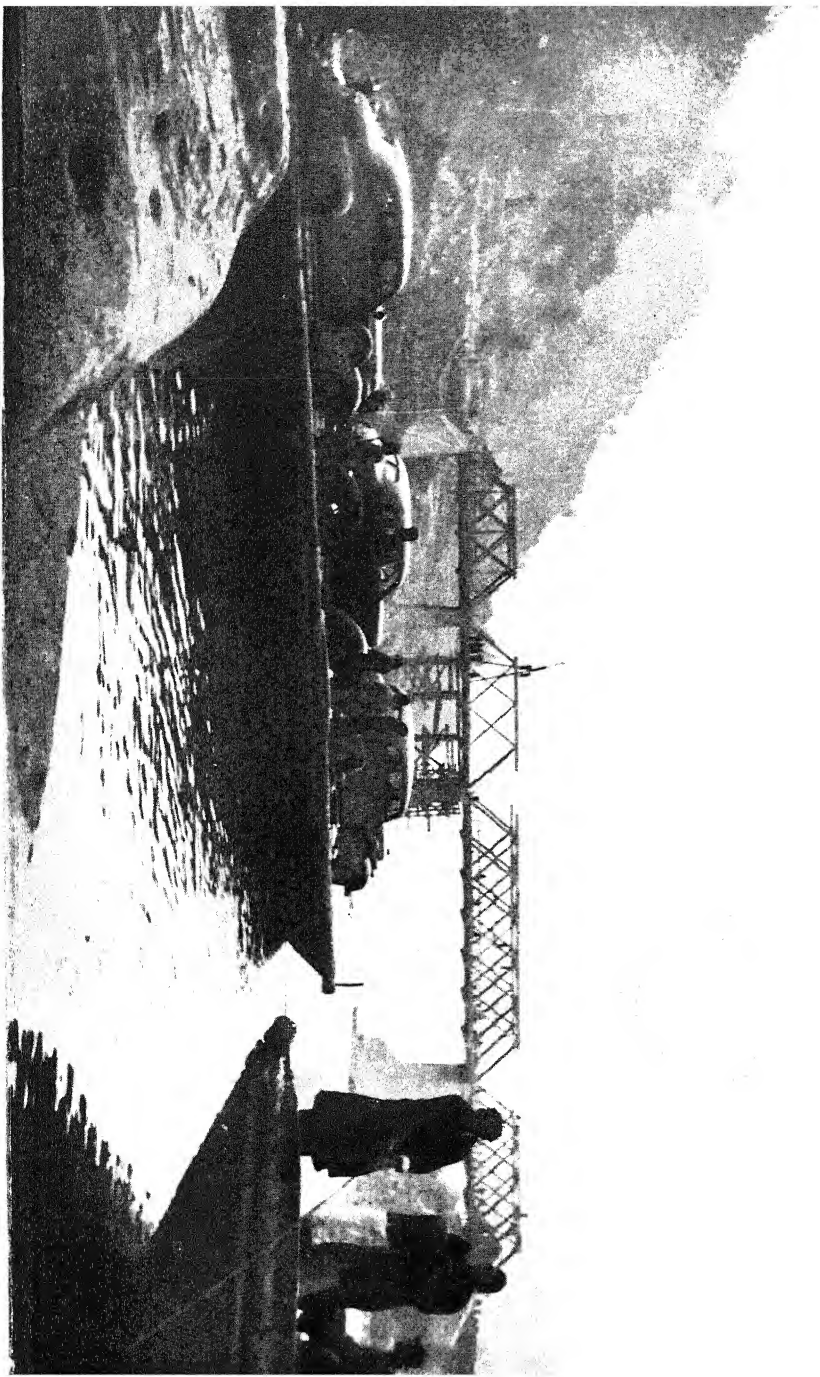
"Yes, yes, and you discussed the New Life Movement. You said she was very charming but did not wash sufficiently. I trust you did not take her into my room? One is never sure with these Chinese. What a morning I have had! This new ban on imports clapped on by the Central Government is going to kill trade."

"No more whisky!" announced Georges dramatically from behind the bar. "No more canned foods, no more butter. Terrible, it is going to be! Shtapka, go down to the cellars and count the stock!"

The pilots gathered round, demanding information, Ike dashed in with the news he couldn't lay hands on even a gallon of petrol, the New Zealander argued with Cass that the Government were cutting off their noses to spite their faces. "What the hell are they going to fly their planes on? Water? And how are they going to manage without the huge Customs revenue they draw from foreign imports?"

"Seen the list of banned articles?" asked someone. "Every damn' thing from toothpaste to combs, from lorries to gin."

"But we are in China, remember," said Cass. "The Government have to stop money flowing out of the country and it is a wise move on their part to put this ban on without warning. Wait for a week, a month and you will see that one person receives a special permit, then another, then a third. Trade will come to life again then; but for the time being everything is at a stand-



still. Even stuff in course of transport by the Michelin is being stopped at the frontier."

Ike turned to me. "That's blown our chances of reaching Pao Shan in the Ford sky high. I haven't enough juice in the tank to make Anning."

To these men and to the Chinese themselves the ban on imports was bound to bring anxiety and hardship, but I wanted to shout at Ike that more valuable things than our chances of reaching Pao Shan were being blown sky-high every day in this country, for in my mind was memory of the dormouse's tragic face, and the feeling of complete impotence I had known on the Highway stole over me. It was impossible to mitigate China's suffering, impossible even to lift one corner of the veil which shrouded her and let a shaft of daylight on to the sprawling, tortured land. Leaving the others to their discussion I slipped out into the yard and stared up at a dozen men who were balanced on a bamboo scaffolding building a new roof to the garage. The sun was hot so they had removed their blue coats and wore only tattered trousers and singlets which looked unnaturally white against the brilliant sky. What was it I had once read by a young English poet who maybe had never visited the East? "*White is the colour of sorrow in China. . . .*"

And even as I stared at the workmen there was an ominous crack from the bamboo and ten figures hurtled through the clear air to land with dull splashes in the muddy yard. Several picked themselves up, howling with fear; two lay horribly still. People rushed about and eventually a doctor arrived—it seemed so stupid to have a doctor. I walked back into the bar and ordered a drink but could not swallow it.

"They have dirtied your nice frock!" exclaimed Madame.

I glanced down at the blobs of red mud spattering my white linen suit. "I'll go and change it."

As I picked my way over the cobbles to the Calmette, words fitted themselves to my footsteps, "*White is the colour of sorrow in China. . . .*"

II

Peculiarly enough, our lunch was quite hilarious. The yard had been cleared and another dozen men were working on an equally crazy scaffolding, and as an antidote to the imports ban Ike had ordered champagne. Certainly under cover of the quick-fire conversation surrounding us I said to M——, "It's this excessive familiarity with death which gets me down," but he just screwed up his eyes and asked how much I was willing to contribute to the good cause of the donkey's destruction.

"We cannot sleep, you cannot sleep, nobody in this street can sleep because of him. W—— and I propose to give twenty dollars each to Shtapka—all small contributions gratefully received—and then he can bribe somebody to poison the animal. We have tried a direct offer to its owner, but he says the beast is a family pet."¹

I proffered five dollars; then we were drawn again into discussion of the Central Government's action by the arrival of the French news sheet which gave a gloomy account of the sudden fall of the dollar in consequence. With a jolt I realized my own financial position was growing hourly more precarious and began to do little sums on the back of an envelope. "Why worry?" asked M—— "You're here for the duration."

"Yesterday my dollars were worth sevenpence halfpenny each English money; this morning they're worth fourpence three farthings; to-morrow—I say, give me back the five bucks for the donkey."

Cass rose. "Come along, it is time to do our shopping."

One of the pilots said lugubriously, "What is so funny about those two is that they always do their shopping when the shops are shut."

It was a pity, perhaps, that we had hit on the shopping fiction to account for our abrupt disappearance each day after luncheon. The truth was we preferred a quiet hour in the Calmette, smoking and talking of China, to an afternoon with the gramophone, so to-day we simply marched out unruffled by the roars of laughter behind us.

"About the visa for the Chinese girl," I began.

¹ Shtapka's efforts were unavailing.

Cass sighed resignedly. "In the middle of chaos you *would* choose to make this absurd request. Where are her papers?"

Shamefacedly I produced the letter of appointment. "Well, you see, she really hasn't got a passport or anything."

"They never have," he answered comfortably. "They weep all over the floor of the French Consulate until some exasperated official makes them fill up a form and issues them with a transit visa. Sometimes they have to weep for quite a long time, but I will try to hurry this up—ah, and you too must have a visa for Indo-China."

"But I'm not going there." Fear coloured my voice. There was a conspiracy abroad to pack me off to Hanoi and if Cass joined it I shouldn't be able to bear life another minute.

He was very gentle. "If the Government had not stopped Ike's petrol you and he might have travelled together; but do not think for a moment the Chinese will allow you to return to Burma over the Highway by bus."

"Why not? When I saw Director Tan the second time about helping Ike and me with our baggage he was positively genial?"

"No doubt, because he envisioned you whirling westwards in a Ford and he had no authority to stop Ike. But to journey alone again? Oh, no, my dear, you have already seen far too much. You will have to go down to Hanoi, it is the only way out."

The end of that sentence was so inescapable, so final. Rage filled me. Would nobody in this China ever understand that my longing to return the way I had come had nothing to do with spying out military secrets, or ferreting out horrors so that I could alarm European or American readers by grisly description? It was the Highway itself which lured me; the rosy glory of Mikiang, the temple of the zodiac at Pao Shan, the serenity of Salween, the red ribbon of road that looped between the ruby mountains of Yunnan and the black ramparts of Tibet.

"It isn't fair," I told Cass childishly. "It was the Highway which brought me to China and now they're snatching it away from me for no reason. If I don't go out by it this time I know in my bones I shall never travel it again."

If he had left me wrapped in my gloom for the remainder of the afternoon I might have resigned myself to Hanoi without further struggle; but he said, "You were mad to attempt it even

one way, for it was an impossible journey for a white woman and how you lived through it I do not know."

I made no answer, but machiavellian schemes ran through my head. The thing to do was to bombard Director Tan once more, use all my letters of introduction, prove myself such a pest to the powers that were in Yunnan Province that they would bundle me into a bus and say "good riddance". Perhaps if I could remember a little more about Leipzig and Saxony? Aloud I said: "I suppose one cannot buy *Gose* beer in Kunming?"

Cass looked down his nose. "French beer is much better. Really, you have the queerest tastes."

Meekly I followed him into his car and we drove to the French Consulate, which seemed crowded with Chinese in the last stages of exhaustion. "They want to get out of their country for various reasons, most of them unpatriotic."

They didn't look as if they wanted anything at all save death, but we stepped over them and interviewed an official who, in turn, ushered us into the presence of the Consul.

He was a nice man, but very sick with throat trouble, and while we waited he told us in a whisper that next week he was flying down to Hanoi for treatment. "The climate here is cruel."

Thanks to Cass we achieved a visa for the dormouse with instructions that she must call at the Consulate before five o'clock; then a form was poked under my nose. "Please fill this up in duplicate. We keep one, you the other. We will make it valid for three months."

Oh, well, even if I filled the wretched things up I didn't need to use them. I heard Cass say I should be going down to Hanoi by Eurasia plane very shortly, but I did not raise my head. "Perhaps," said the courteous Consul, "we may travel together?"

My suspicious mind grew alert. So that was the game, was it? Send me down under escort, as it were, with no chance of evading supervision and attempting to hitch-hike my way back to Pao Shan. "It would be a pleasure to make the journey in your company," I murmured mendaciously.

Driving back to the hotel I shut my eyes, for half the population seemed in imminent danger of annihilation beneath our wheels. It was always the same in a Chinese city; nobody dreamed of getting out of the way and the most skilful driver could not

avoid fatal accidents. Not that the relatives of the victims minded; rather did they bask in the *réclame* which enveloped them during the subsequent inquiry, but I never became used to the terrors of motor-riding in Kunming.

The bar was empty save for M—— and W——, who slept peacefully in their chairs. "Where is the Chinese lady who called this morning?" I asked Shtapka.

"She came at two o'clock, Madame. She wept until three—see where I had to wipe the floor?—then she went away, leaving some message I could not understand."

Cass laughed. "I could have told you all your trouble was for nothing."

Mr. Wong Han-min popped up, genie-wise, from behind the bar. "I called to ask if you would do me the honour of eating chow with me this evening?"

"Thank you, yes, no, I don't know. I must find Miss Wei first; she has to be at the Consulate within an hour."

"We do not eat chow until seven o'clock, very nice, fit in very well."

"The Chinese lady," embellished Shtapka, "had a man with her with two monkeys on chains."

"Never mind the monkeys," urged Mr. Wong, "chow."

The sight of Cass giggling into his whisky annoyed me beyond measure. Waving the agitated Wong to one side I shouted to Shtapka, "Where did the lady go?"

"How should I know, Madame?"

M—— opened one eye. "Nuts!" he muttered and shut it again.

Ignoring Cass's protests I whirled out and up the street towards the China Travel Service's offices, thought of the dormouse's misery clutching at me. Poor small creature, she *had* to get that visa and if she had mistaken the time of our appointment it wasn't her fault. Behind me trotted Wong, mopping his forehead. "Nice chow, new Kunming Hotel restaurant, bamboo shoots, special fried duckling, great experience for English lady."

He was still in pursuit when I dived into the office and demanded to see Joe. The clerk shook his head. "Chow gone," he said simply.

"Will he return this afternoon?"

"Eh?"

Wong pushed forward. Presently he translated, "Mr. Chow has gone on a picnic party to the hot sulphur baths at Anning."

I lost the remnants of my temper. The clerk scuttled off and his fellow-worker hid beneath the counter; only Wong stood his ground. "Nice chow, oh, excellent chow!"

"Don't you understand it is very important I find Joe and Miss Wei immediately?"

"Impossible. Now let us discuss Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer pictures."

We discussed them; we also discussed the merits of the soya bean, the guerrilla armies of Chiang Kai-shek, the New Life Movement and the patterns of shirts my companion had just received from Hanoi. We ate a large and satisfying meal, and we drank countless cups of tea, and we were shown all over the new Kunming hotel by an eager manager. And all the time I fretted over the dormouse and her visa. If the Chows had really gone to Anning then she would be crying her eyes out alone in their house. "I must go to see her," I told Wong.

Without demur he agreed, so we set off on the long walk to Joe's home. Tired and footsore we knocked on the courtyard door; there was no answer. "Let us wait for a time," said Wong, so we sat down on the step and watched several small children playing in the mud. The moon rose, a golden ball in the indigo sky, and from the archway came the shuffle of footsteps. Out of the shadows stepped the dormouse. The puffiness had gone from her face and her eyes sparkled with delight. Catching sight of me she ran forward, both little hands outstretched. "Oh, Honourable Bigland, I have had such a beautiful afternoon! Look at my lotus buds, are they not lovely?"

"But your visa? The Consul promised you should have it if you were at his office before five to-day."

She lifted a delicate shoulder. "Ah, there is no hurry, to-morrow will do."

"Yes," echoed the Chows. "We came early this afternoon to ask you to join us at Anning, such a pity we missed you. But let us go indoors now and have some Ovaltine."

My refusal was a shade frigid. Turning to Wong I remarked that the hour was growing late, so we bowed our way backwards through the archway. "Are there any rickshaws?" I demanded.

His face wrinkled in the moonlight. "I much regret," his

voice was slow, "we had such good chow for I have no money left."

"But please, I will pay for the rickshaws."

He was horrified. Women did not do such things in China. He apologized again for his poverty-stricken state but if I would give him the esteemed privilege of escorting me home on foot?

Compunction smote me. For almost a fortnight now this kindly Chinese man had danced attendance on me, fixed up with hairdressers, interpreted for me, shown me his city, put up with my tantrums, given me chow, and my ingratitude was unforgivable. "I am so sorry, Mr. Wong, that this evening has been so disturbed. I thought Miss Wei's visa was an urgent matter; it seems I was wrong."

He loped beside me in the moonlight. "Nothing disturbs my pleasure in our acquaintanceship," and then, because he knew the dormouse's story he went on: "Do not judge harshly although our ways seem strange to you. We live so near to sorrow always; sometimes we wish to escape."

A serene small person, Mr. Wong. As we traversed the long streets of Kunming city he discoursed on Chinese philosophy, and his voice was soft as running water. Gradually I became soothed, forgot the endless hours of chasing Consuls, passports and dormice; thought only of the beauty of this Chinese night and the amazing kindness of Chinese people. "I have a friend," said the sweet voice beside me, "whose family were massacred after Nanking. He draws all healing from reading the poems of our great writers. Things inanimate give us much comfort."

Animate or inanimate—what was the difference in China? Floods of tears or a lotus blossom floating on a still blue lake. The quick clack of *geta* on a pavement or the clanking of an ankle-chain. Tender bamboo shoots or a cake of straw bound with mud—did it matter which?

III

Once again I faced Director Tan in his cool, green-lit room.

"... and as my friend Mr. E—— cannot obtain petrol," I finished, "I should be most grateful if I might be allowed to book a passage in one of your buses."

He sipped his tea slowly. "No, I am sorry. All foreign passes across the Highway have been stopped."

Suddeniy I remembered Hsiak'Wan and the supposed Italian priest. "May I repeat I have no interest in affairs military, Director, and I do not seek to pry."

He bowed. "We know that. You like our people and they like you; but we can make no exceptions to this rule for lately several unwelcome characters have tried to reach China by the Burma route. Besides, when you write your book you may well put into it unwittingly some things which will not reflect satisfactorily upon Chinese methods."

"I will write the truth, put the beauty and the tragedy of your country side by side and thus let people form their own judgment."

"That is right; but on the way here you travelled in luxury, you saw no tragedy?"

I thought ironically: "Oh, no! What about the little nigger boys and the Hsiak'Wan beggars and Mangshih and Chefann and Lungling? What about the starving drivers and coolies and the nights in streaming rain and the black pigs snuffling horribly through the streets?" But aloud I said: "Will you please think the matter over, Director?"

He smiled sadly. "Not before October—then who knows?"

I glanced at a calendar advertising Eurasia airlines. It bore a July date. In a final attempt to move him I said: "I wonder if you realize how I love your Highway?"

He brightened. "Ah, I told you about the three million pounds spent on cement? The trouble is we cannot yet afford to transport it from Rangoon. A great sum of money, is it not?"

Our farewells were courteous; but when I regained the Calmette I said desperately to Cass: "You talk to a Chinese about the wonder of the Highway and he talks to you about cement.

You sweat blood to get a Chinese woman a visa for Indo-China and she spends the afternoon picking lotus-buds."

He glanced up from his writing. "And you talk to me about China and I talk to you about cacti."

Still the Highway lured me. Somebody told me to interview an important personage and ask for a special pass. He was old and obese and his head rested on a wooden pillow and the air of his room was heavy with opium. A brilliant intellectual, he harangued me for an hour on the folly of Yunnan joining in China's war, expectorating with violence between each sentence. Somebody else advised me to parley with a high Government official; he lectured me on the cleanly habits of his people all afternoon and then led me out through a yard which stank to heaven. A third person suggested I made contact with a leading missionary, but this led to an oration against Buddhism which had naught to do with my request.

Sick of abortive interviews I tramped round the lake, glaring fiercely at *my* road which nobody would let me travel. For the Chinese were adamant, I could see that. It appeared that the supposed Italian priest and one or two others had given them a nasty scare and they were suffering from an attack of spy-fever as sharp as any which ever attacked a Russian, added to which my own rather free speech had frightened them. If a woman spoke so boldly of the prevalence of venereal disease in Mangshih what might she not say if she travelled from town to town in the local bus?

But after a few days I found fresh interest in study of Kunming, this seething, colourful, lovely yet appalling city to which streamed people from all over China. Mindful of Mr. Lee's remarks at Pao Shan I studied the Yunnanese themselves first and realized how detached they were from the conflict which absorbed their country. Their Governor was astute. Very cleverly he smiled greetings to envoys of the Central Government while putting every conceivable obstacle in their way. He was fairly young too, and as a patriotic Chinese put it to me, "He has a long time to live and nobody dare kill him." He and his underlings ruled Yunnan province absolutely and they were remarkably fond of money. Into their capacious maw they took French, English, Russians, Germans—any and every foreigner provided he had sufficient means to make the swallowing of him

worth their while; but what they failed to understand was that in many cases the foreigner's Occidental knowledge enabled him to, as it were, disgorge himself plus certain assets.

For the Yunnanese were as credulous as the members of the Central Government. There was nothing they would not buy—if it were bad enough. They scented bargains from a mile away and simply clamoured for permission to purchase cheap-jack stuff which was of no use to them whatever. Tenaciously too they held to their own currency despite the fact that ten Yunnanese dollars were worth but one in National Currency, and their main idea in life was to make things as uncomfortable as possible for the people who were being drafted weekly to their city.

As for the foreigners, their idea was naturally to make as much money out of China's war as they could and where a few dozen of them genuinely tried to help Chinese and Yunnanese alike the majority of their five hundred strong community reaped a rich harvest in return for rubbish.

Then there was the French railway from Hanoi. Five metres on either side of the six-hundred mile track from the Indo-Chinese border were conceded to France and, in addition, the actual station in Kunming and the alleyway in which the hotels and the Calmette were situated were virtually French soil. Strict though the French were and favourable as their attitude was towards China, that railway provided a means whereby unscrupulous traders of many nationalities could bring in curious goods.

So despite its surface beauty Kunming was a thorn in China's flesh—and a whole host of thorns to Chiang Kai-shek and his Central Government. It should have proved such a haven during this time of war with its rich lands, its sunny equable climate, its altitude and its comparative immunity from air-raids¹; in reality it was a menace to China's internal peace, and underneath its beauty hid a thousand festering sores.

The city was age-old, held tightly between its grim grey walls. It could not hope to house its mighty influx of new inhabitants, so in the evil smelling alleys leading from the main streets people died in large numbers from starvation and disease, while from north and east refugees poured in through the gates bearing with them worse sicknesses than any Kunming poss-

¹ Several serious raids have since been made on the city.

essed. There were lepers who crawled on all-fours; there were women raped by Japanese soldiers whose jaw-bones showed white in faces eaten by syphilis, and many of them were soon to give birth to ailing and unwanted children they would wrap between blankets and quietly strangle; there were creatures driven mad by memory of terror, by the loss of their families, by the hardships of an endless journey. Watching the refugees entering Kunming was an education in the results of modern warfare which ought to have been thrust under the nose of every intelligent Westerner. The Chinese themselves seemed oblivious of such things, because they had the strange philosophy of spirit bound in the end to lead their land to victory. In the schools and colleges earnest young men and women studied with a thoroughness unknown in any other country; in the restaurants people enthusiastically discussed the New Life Movement and the progress of the war; on the city walls flared posters exhorting men to join the Army, and in the market happy crowds jostled good-humouredly as they bought sheaves of flowers. Overhead a black Junker belonging to Eurasia zoomed south to Hanoi and a drone from the north signalled the arrival of a C.N.A.C. plane from Chungking. Up the street stumbled an ox with great raw patches under his yoke and along the gutter hobbled a goat with a broken leg. Back in Hotel de la Poste the pilots went on shooting dice.

Yet the longer I stayed in Kunming the more I understood that the Chinese faculty for putting carts before horses was principally to blame for its tragedy. Vehicles were lavishly bought, but no mechanics trained to look after them; feverish building of the Yunnan-Burma railway was proceeding, but nobody gave a thought to the impassable state of the Chungking road; an American factory near the Burmese border delivered airplanes in huge batches, but the foreign pilots were not allowed to instruct the Chinese in their use so the machines either fell to pieces in the hangars or were crashed by inexperienced fliers.

The new ban on imports had made bad worse. Theoretically, the Governmental action was sound since it definitely conserved Chinese funds in China; practically it brought starvation to the many thousands who had previously just managed to eke out a poor existence, for nearly all the things they required, save rice, were imported goods and the crafty Yunnanese shopkeepers

promptly cleared their shelves of all stocks and blandly mentioned prohibitive prices to intending customers. I myself had been caught that way when shopping for M—— and another pilot, the chemist demanding forty-five dollars for a tube of Pepsodent, two cakes of soap and a packet of razor blades. The week before I had purchased the same articles for seven dollars fifty but protest was useless although I knew perfectly well the chemist probably had a nice little store in the cellar. "Imports impossible!" he smiled.

Even Mrs. Chow was harassed. Many of her friends were hard put to it to make ends meet and while they all tried to help each other the Chinese idea of charity, in its truest sense, was somewhat dim, for few educated Chinese could endure the thought of parting with cold cash or its equivalent in kind to those in want. The Chows themselves assisted their friends, the Yunnanese, the refugees and even foreigners with an impassive impartiality—but the Chows were a unique couple. Their countrymen preferred to hoard five thousand dollars and then spirit it out of China's reach with a celerity almost awesome. A needy friend could join the family table for chow and welcome; yet if he pleaded for five dollars to pay the rent of the miserable roof sheltering his wife and family, he met with courteous refusal—life was so cheap in China. If he, his wife and his children died from exposure or starvation or disease well, it was sad enough but everyone had troubles of their own at home.

Drifting around the city, watching the masses of people in the streets, listening to endless conversations between Chinese friends, I formed the uneasy conviction that the patriotism of the average Chinese was thoroughly insincere. They would talk from dawn until dusk about the Generalissimo, about the blockade of trade owing to the war, about their love for China being so great that they even gave up dancing, shut the theatres and limited their personal pleasures to aid her in her struggle; but that talk was too facile, too glib altogether, the talk of people deliberately wearing blinkers that they might not see—as I, a foreigner had seen—too much.

And even as they talked, swaying themselves into a fine fervour of sacrifice, they were busily thinking out how best to tuck their savings or profits far from the predatory hands of the Central Government.

The New Life Movement, that elastic organization which elicited so much response from its adherents, failed to move me. It was so painfully like all the movements conceived the world over as mental soporifics for a nation in transition. Maybe it served a purpose; all I could feel was its innate spuriousness. To begin with it was a Western importation—or rather bowdlerization—utterly unsuited to Asia; to end with I never met a single Chinese who steadfastly practised what he preached about it. It forbade theatres but permitted cinemas; it vetoed dancing but encouraged its members to eat colossal and expensive meals wherein delicacies abounded. It eschewed strong liquor with the result that everyone drank lime juice while with foreigners and rice spirit when by themselves. In short, it was a movement reeking of petty bureaucracy—and bureaucracy never saved a suffering country yet.

That was one of this supposedly “new” China’s foremost weaknesses; she was bureaucratic from tip to tail. She had no conscription because it might touch the hundreds of thousands of little Government officials who copied notes for the Ministry of This or That; besides, why have conscription when you could whistle up a million or so coolies whenever they were needed? She had no rules applicable to rich and poor alike; the Mandarins, the Members of the Government, the Generals and the Professors would never stand for that. She had few social services because one enlightened peasant might be as dangerous as a flaming torch in a room full of teazled cotton-yarn.

But then there was really not any “new” China. There was a sort of mushroom-growth superimposed upon a tortoise’s back—the latter would eventually achieve an end to its slow journey, the former would inevitably and quickly crumble into decay.

For the moment, however, China was full of the propaganda which irks the mind, the kind which is punctuated by idiotic slogans and trite phrases and the usual claptrap of politicians talking about “intolerable burdens”. But these sillinesses scarcely disturbed the smooth surface of her philosophy. Slowly, inexorably, China moved to dominion over Asia.

IV

An invitation couched in elegant French informed me I was bidden to dine with an Annamite family at seven o'clock punctually on Saturday evening (morning dress will be worn).

"What do I wear?"

Cass looked methodically through my scanty wardrobe for, innocent of the fearful social activities of Kunming, I had left my few decent garments in H——'s care in Rangoon. After a lot of sighing he held up the dress with the embroidered sleeves once admired by my hairdresser.

I regarded it dubiously. Originally I had brought those sleeves from Russia, carried lingeringly against my tummy through an unfriendly Germany, but were the Annamites susceptible to Soviet clothes? Somehow I rather thought not. "What *are* Annamites?"

"Emigré Indian and Chinese mixed. Are you aware that this is Saturday and the hour is six o'clock?"

I was perverse. "How did the Indians and Chinese mix?"

"Through the procreative urge, of course. The result is better than one might have expected. You have a tiny beard at the back of your neck which is highly unbecoming. Sit down and I will remove it with my safety-razor."

Cass too was going to a party, but not an Annamite one. Within ten minutes he was off in a whirl of instructions that the first in should sit up for the other and compare notes; but I stayed dreaming for half an hour, staring at the cactus plants in the corner of the room. One of them, a small, squat, hairy fellow had a perfect scarlet blossom.

Of course, I was late for the party. My hostess came forward, a lissom, exquisite figure in a tissue robe. "You will have a Dubonnet? Ah, it is such a privilege to meet an English writer!"

Not for the first time I encountered the exactitude of the saying that no man is a prophet in his own country, but in pursuance of the base commercial hope that the Annamites en masse might order copies of my books I lumbered after her across the room, acutely conscious that my shoes were size six.

"Madame, may I present M. S——, M. N——, M. D——?"

Three hazy, flattish faces bobbed up and down. Overcome by

the occasion I remarked apropos of my thoughts to one, "I have a dear friend who takes sevens yet remains the most delightful woman I know."

Could a flattish, ochre-hued face freeze? If so, this one did. Somewhere my hostess's voice fluted, "Surely you have read Madame's books?"

I drew on every ounce of self-control, decided I was no prophet in Annam and tried a friendly tack. "Have you climbed the wireless tower? I did, this afternoon."

The answer came with deliberation. "We do nothing towards the life of Kunming; we are not interested."

Cautiously I glanced around the room. The women of the party were grouped on the far side; the men on my side. This would never do—just then I caught sight of the opium-smoking Frenchman and his two girl-friends and wilted.

After a few stilted exchanges of courtesies my host approached me. "We dine now."

We did. On an enormous table servants spread steaming plates of Annamite delicacies, each masked in fish-oil sauce. The company snatched at these voraciously and so soon as a dish was emptied another one arrived to take its place. But my role was that of cuckoo, for my host was bent upon showing me every politeness so searched with his chop-sticks for rare titbits, tested these by nibbling them and then placed them on my plate.

I had seldom enjoyed a meal less. Six or seven mouthfuls I managed to swallow with some pretence at enjoyment, but the taste of the sauce and the knowledge that each scrap of food had already been sampled undid me. Laying down my sticks I murmured that the dinner was delicious but that my appetite was always of the poorest.

My host was both alarmed and indignant. "We eat for hours," he assured me, and beckoned a boy. "You must try the aperitif I always take myself. It induces a feeling of intense hunger."

He did not tell me the name of this miraculous drink, but it also tasted of fish-oil and one of the Frenchman's girl-friends, watching my efforts to drink it, leaned forward and said sweetly, "Have you fever, Madame? In Hotel de la Poste you eat well, but then perhaps you miss the company of your delightful French friend?"

Despite my misery I giggled, for apparently every Annamite was an incurable romantic and every one at table immediately decided my lack of appetite was due to the absence of a loved one, but my amusement did not last as my host beamed, announced that love would pass me by if I did not grow a little plumper, and picked out yet more scraps of chicken, pork and vegetables with which to tempt me.

And we ate for two hours; at least the company at large did, while the sinister mound of discarded food grew beneath my chair. At last we rose and passed into another room where I tangoed solemnly with my host to a very scratchy gramophone. The windows were tight shut, the carpet was thick and uneven, a brazier-full of incense sent smoke-clouds wreathing through what little air there was left, servants kept handing round trays of sweetmeats and syrupy liquids, the twenty-odd guests were gay and noisy.

At eleven o'clock I could bear it no longer since the fish-oil sauce was doing appalling things to my inside, but a clamour broke out when I said farewell. No guest ever left such a party before 4 a.m., at the earliest, then just as I was becoming frantic my host smiled archly and wagged a fat finger at me. "Ah, but Madame is in love, a thousand pardons!"

No Oriental bride was ever more fussed over. A car was called, as it was impossible to keep a romantic appointment by rickshaw, and my hostess insisted upon wrapping a filmy scarf about my head, another lady thrust a bottle of smelling-salts into my hand and my host presented me with a white lily.

More dead than alive, I staggered into Hotel de la Poste. The Michelin had come in that evening and the bar was crowded with its passengers, but in a corner sat M——, placidly eating noodles and French beans. He looked at the lily, the smelling-salts and the scarf, said "Well, well, well, well!" and went on eating.

Without a word I joined him. We finished a second bowl of noodles and a third plate of beans, sat back and smiled at each other. I was beginning to feel human once more.

"Shtapka!" and as that remarkable infant scuttered up to the table I presented him with the smelling-salts. "For your wife. Maybe," I added kindly, "she is more in love than I am."

"Tell me this story," demanded M——, and when I had done



so he pulled a small bottle of bicarbonate of soda from his pocket. "Have some," he advised, "that sauce is dreadful stuff."

Madame advanced upon us. "A telegram," she announced proudly.

I slit open the envelope. Inside was a scrap of paper covered with Chinese characters. On the reverse side, in English writing, was the message, "Telegram to Director Fang Pao Shan unsent wires down."

So the telegram I had sent so hopefully over a week ago had never reached its destination! Turning the envelope upside down I told M—— sadly they had not returned the twelve dollars I had paid for it.

He grinned, "Of course they haven't."

"Oh, well, I suppose they'll give it me if I show this at the post office."

He laughed outright. "Do you forget you are in China?"

Grimly I determined to do battle with the postal authorities on the morrow, but when, after searching for a good hour I found the "New" post office I was unlucky. This was a far larger building than the one opposite the hotel but the same system of small windows with a head popping out of each obtained, and at every window were long queues of patient Chinese. Twenty minutes' waiting brought me to my turn, another twenty brought an individual who averred he understood "much English", and an audience gathered to see the fun.

"I sent this telegram off on July —. It was returned to me last night with this message. Might I please have my twelve dollars back?"

Horror contorted his features. "Wires down. No money."

"Yes, but you were unable to send the telegram, therefore you can hardly expect me to pay for it?"

"Did pay," he answered flatly.

"Of course I paid. I want the money back."

"Wires down. No money."

"Look here, is there anybody else here who understands English?"

"No. Wires down. No money."

Furious, I produced three receipts for cables, two to England and one to Rangoon. "Can you find out for me if these have ever been sent off?"

He turned over the slips negligently. "Perhaps, perhaps no. I do not know, nobody knows. Telegraph very bad, wires down, no . . ."

I interrupted hastily, "But these are T.S.F.?"

He flipped the slips back at me. "All the same. Next, please."

I retired to sit under a magnolia tree in the courtyard of the post office and calculate exactly how much I had spent upon cables and telegrams since arriving in Kunming. The total came to ninety-five dollars and my receipts were apparently no proof that the messages had ever been sent off. Months afterwards I discovered that the only cable which ever reached its destination was one to New York—the Central Government had netted quite a handsome profit out of me.

V

Ching, the monkeys and myself had spent a satisfying day. Armed with a large parcel of food provided by Madame, we had set off early in the morning, travelling in a jolting, tarpaulin-covered local bus into which were crammed ourselves, seven coolies, five women and innumerable children, not to mention a crate of ducks, two kerosene tins full of water and a huge netted bag of cabbages. We had three punctures, during the mending of which we drank bowls of tea at wayside eating-houses, we had a broken axle, after which we packed into a second and yet more crowded bus, the monkeys and myself came in for much admiration from villagers, and eventually we lurched into Anning about noon.

We shared our rolls, meat and fruit with four golden children in blue shifts, tied the monkeys securely to a tree and parted, I to visit the women's part of the famous Anning sulphur baths and Ching the men's part. As once before in the mountains I lay drowsily in the hot yet invigorating water, staring up at a blue sky. Nobody worried me, except one or two women who waded across the bath and stared curiously at the colour of my body, for surprisingly enough few of the Kunming folk appreciated this delectable place set in the shelter of the hills.

Refreshed, I rejoined Ching and we lay face downwards on the close thymy turf, letting the hot sun soak into our very

bones. Around us darted the usual myriads of bright birds, beside us the monkeys played and fought and snatched at fir cones. Presently Ching stretched out his arm and took my handbag, holding it up to me and making gestures with his head. "Pass, pass," he said, and grinned delightedly at his prowess in the English tongue.

I nodded, and he drew out my passport and a small map showing the air route from Southampton to Australia. This was a favourite game we had played during our Highway journey, and now we spread map and passport on the grass and began it all over again, the idea being that I taught him the names of the various countries. "England", he could manage, but his version of Southampton was astonishing. French names defeated him utterly and Corsica bothered him, but when he had traced the route as far as Italy he gabbled, "Rom, Brinsi, Attin, Alexandria"—he said Alexandria several times because he was immensely proud of his pronunciation.

Back across the Mediterranean we went to the Palestinian coast, and he stumbled badly over Haifa and Galilee but revived at Baghdad, while from Basra down the Persian Gulf to Karachi and from Calcutta to Bangkok he was positively brilliant. East of Siam, however, he seemed to lose interest and reverted to my passport, which he adored, crooning over the stamps and howling with mirth at my deplorable photograph.

A stupid game perhaps, but one which always engrossed us and an excellent method of conversation between two people of different race who could not otherwise converse at all except on the subjects of monkeys and rice. All afternoon we played it until I signalled it was time we caught a return bus. Waiting by the roadside several cars swept past us and their European occupants stared in amaze, but one of them stopped and an American voice said, "You stranded, Madam, can I give you a lift into Kunming?"

Perversely I thanked him very much, opened the saloon door and stepped in, followed by Ching. "We will hold a monkey each so that they won't scratch your paint," I added politely.

"But, good God, I thought you were alone—come out to the sulphur baths and got stuck, and that this coolie fellow was annoying you?"

I grinned. He was so very burra sahib and so hideously concerned. "Oh, no, Mr. Ching is a great friend of mine. He drove me over the Highway. To-day we have been having a picnic here."

"But my dear lady, you can't make friends with a coolie? And damn it all, I've never had one of them in my car yet. I mean, you don't know the East, that's very obvious. Honestly you can't . . ."

I opened the door again. "I'm sorry. We can easily wait for a bus."

He dropped over the wheel. "Lord, no, you mustn't do that. You've no idea what filthy traps they are. But I say, is he—er—clean?"

"Perfectly," I assured him solemnly.

Ching nudged me. "Bigland," he beamed, very impressed with the Renault car. "Rom, Brinsi, Attin, ALEXANDRIA!"

The neck of our poor benefactor was crimson and he drove like Jehu into Kunming, Ching and I clasping a monkey apiece and bouncing up and down in the rear seat. We entered the city by the gate near Hotel du Lac and he slewed his head round to inquire diffidently if I were staying there, breathing relievedly when he heard I was not.

"I'm going to the street by the railway myself," he said, "I never remember the name of it."

"Hsuin Tsin Chieh," I told him. "It would be very kind if you would let my friend out at the corner by the bridge."

His expression lightened. At least he would not be forced to drive through the alleyway, which was virtually a French Concession, with a coolie in the back seat, but he need not have worried for Ching and most of his decent compatriots avoided that street like the plague.

We bade each other good-bye effusively with much hugging of wrists and hands and much patting of monkeys; then I asked the American, "Won't you come into Hotel de la Poste for a drink?"

I saw him hesitate as we jolted down the alleyway, but as the car stopped two of the pilots strolled out of the yard and hailed the pair of us. It seemed my companion was connected with an airplane factory and had already met them, therefore he stepped out cautiously and glanced sideways at me as he did so.

"I asked this gentleman to come in for a drink. Very kindly he gave us a lift from Anning."

He was still slightly subdued, but thawed visibly when we were seated round the bar, and I think he was genuinely relieved that I did not display any unexpectedly Chinese habits, but after a whisky he gave me a lecture on the folly of consorting with coolies. "You never know," he hinted darkly. "They have no idea of how to behave towards a European woman."

"Yes, they have. The man you saw me with this afternoon is one of my best friends in China."

"It's true," said M——, and added, "She isn't a mental case, you know, just a little queer—but we like her."

The American gave it up then and began discussing aircraft. Remembering I wanted a prescription made up I slipped out and down the street to the Calmette Dispensary, where an aged Chinese studied the names I had copied out in French for him. The preparation was simply the citronella one which had proved so efficacious against insects on the Highway, but its ingredients stumped the dispenser. "Citronella? No. Carobolic acid? No."

"But surely there is some carbolic acid here? I know the Chinese chemists cannot make this up, but I thought that here you would have such things?"

"No carbolic nearer than Hanoi," he replied sorrowfully. "But now you are here, Madame, would you care to see our out-patients' department?"

We walked through into a long wide corridor thronged with women and children. "A touch of skin disease," said my guide, pointing to a baby screaming in its mother's arms, its tiny naked body encrusted with eczema from forehead to toes. I shuddered and walked on. There were children with burns, and women with ulcers; there was a group of blind folk, the flies sticking to their rheumy sightless eyes; there were three old crones so emaciated that their elbow bones had pierced their flesh. In a room to our right some excitement was going on. "What is the trouble?" asked my guide.

A doctor answered him. "This woman," he pointed, "refuses to remove her robe. We have to examine her, and while she has taken off her under-garments she will not take off her robe."

Against the bare whitewashed wall stood a young girl of about eighteen, clutching the tight collar of her white robe

about her neck. Exquisitely lovely she was, with all grace in her slender body, but in the dark eyes which stared at us out of the heart-shaped face was stark terror. With one quick movement the doctor leaned forward and tore at the fastenings of the robe. It slid down round the cowering girl's feet, revealing her beauty, but swiftly she clasped her arms across her breast. The doctor lifted them; on the golden skin were three ghastly, weeping sores—syphilis.

In the dusk I went back to Hotel de la Poste, but before me danced vision of the girl's eyes, wide with fear.

My benefactor had departed. "He went in a hurry," said M—— dreamily. "He was afraid he'd go nuts too, like us."

In front of a showcase where Madame kept French soaps and creams for sale stood a little Chinese girl, who greeted me happily and handed me a small parcel. She was a gay child, about seventeen, and a few days earlier I had admired a Cambodian ring of silver she wore, so now she had brought me a similar one. Smiling my thanks, I slipped it on to my finger and joined her at the case. Six months ago she had not known the difference between lipstick and mascara, but since then she had become the mistress of a European and now she chose correct shades of rouge and powder with the carefulness of her Western sisters, but she had also learnt to shroud her slim form in its bright robe under a fearful loud-checked ulster which hung shapelessly from her shoulders.

Le-Lo amused me. She had the temper of a shrew, the frank greediness of a small pig; but she would part with all her pretty baubles to less fortunate friends and her frequent laughter was delightful. This evening, however, as I studied her absorbed face I wondered what would happen to her eventually. Would she hoard up a *dot*, marry a Chinese of her own peasant class and sink into the apathy which besets those forced to bear child after child and work in paddy-field after paddy-field; or would she drift from lover to lover, ending up in a year or two in the same pitiable condition as the girl I had just seen?

For the moment, at any rate, she was happy. Having bought some fifteen dollars' worth of creams and unguents she tripped off, huddling the ridiculous ulster around her. Joe entered, passing her in the doorway, and I saw him edge slightly to one side. He was in melancholy mood again, because he had come

to tell me that the dormouse was actually leaving the next morning for Hanoi. "And she goes by air," he said in an awed voice. "We tell her she will lose her life as surely as did her poor brother, but she will not listen."

I said I was sure Eurasia was a safe line, and he turned his attention to the ring on my finger. "That is a very beautiful ring; where did you buy it?"

"Le-Lo gave it to me. I am taking it home for my daughter."

"But you cannot—not for your daughter! Do you not know the Le-Lo girl is a prostitute?"

"You're a little harsh, Joe. After all, you have to remember what her life must have been like. She was hungry and she was young. That is a bad combination, you know, and when somebody comes along and offers relief from such an existence can you blame anybody for taking it?"

"Most decidedly, yes! In our country good women would die rather than sell themselves."

"Now you are being melodramatic."

He sat bolt upright. "What exactly is the meaning of that word 'melodramatic'?"

I hoped my explanation would effectively divert his attention from Le-Lo, but as he rose to go he said gravely, "Please desist from this dreadful idea of taking your daughter this contaminated ring."

Standing in the yard after bidding him good-night, I thought how odd it all was. The American was horrified by my friendship with Ching; Joe was scandalized because I took my child Le-Lo's ring; the pilots teased me continually about the procession of Chinese acquaintances who came to drink lime squash and discuss matters of moment with me; the Chinese themselves were ready to offer me the moon and sixpence if I would refrain from returning across the Highway.

The closer my view of China's puzzle the more impossible it was to fit in the pieces, for into the picture of the sun-bright field near Anning crept the figure of the girl in the Calmette dispensary, and across the portrait of the weeping dormouse drifted lotus flowers. The driver in Lungling had told me I should have to search long to find the serenity which was this country's secret; but each time I thought I had captured that elusive quality it danced off, will o' the wisp fashion, leaving

me to gaze blankly at either loveliness or horror, and as I thought of these things I abandoned, voluntarily and with infinite regret, my determination to re-travel the vision of Sun Yat Sen. There were other journeys I had to make in China.

VI

I developed a headache counting my slender resources the next morning while I waited for Joe to take me to the airport to see the dormouse off to Hong Kong. If I booked my return air passage to Chungking and also paid for a passage down to Hanoi, I should have so many hundred dollars left. Written down it seemed a largish sum, but owing to the currency fall it was sadly small when translated into sterling. Never mind, with care I should be able to manage a few days in China's new capital, a day or so in Hanoi and my fare back to Rangoon. Optimistically I sent fresh cables arranging for the last part of my long journey, and asked Joe to arrange for the Chungking-Hanoi trip.

"Hotel de la Poste will give you your bill in *piastres*," reminded Cass.

"But I will pay it in dollars," I told him grandly.

His grin disturbed me. My non-mathematical brain had entirely failed to grasp the fact that the value of the National dollar had also fallen heavily in Indo-China, so I skulked along to Georges and asked him to make out my account up to date. The total horrified me. Could it be true that three meals a day, a few drinks, and quantities of orange and lemon squashes had mounted to such a staggering sum?

I was still budgeting frantically when Joe arrived and looked over my shoulder. "That is all right," he said in response to my groans. "You must live on chow until you leave China—far better for you than foreign foods."

There was chow—and chow. Remembering meals eaten on the Highway I shivered.

The flying-field was muddy enough in all conscience; the dormouse muddled it further with her tears. Poor child, she was desolate and panic-stricken at the idea of flying to Hanoi, at thought of her parents' grief over the dead brother, at the knowl-

edge she must travel alone through the strange land of Indo-China. Valiantly we cheered her up but we had almost to lift her into the plane. "Oh, Bigland, let us go back to Pao Shan, where we were happy!"

Arranging the familiar fruit-basket, the bundle containing her quilt and her case beside her, I too longed passionately for the temple of Pao Shan, for "all the fun in the world", for the peaceful days we had spent in the colourful bazaars, but I said briskly, "Think, in three days' time you will be at home with your mother."

The engines throbbed and she clutched my arm. "I must go now, dormouse—only three hours and you will be in Hanoi."

Foolishly Joe and I stood on the tarmac waving until the plane was out of sight, despite the fact that all its blinds were drawn; then we returned drearily to Kunming. "First the dormouse," said Joe sadly, "then you. Why is it friends must part?"

And although I had long grown used to transient friendships, this time I echoed his sentimental speech.

We walked into Eurasia's offices and booked a provisional passage from Kunming to Hanoi on a date some ten days ahead, but all their liners up to Chungking were full. "D'you mind being flown by a Chinese pilot in a C.N.A.C. machine?" asked Joe, and I, my mind busy with thoughts of the dormouse, said "No."

"Very well, this is Saturday. On Monday morning at 4 a.m. a plane leaves for Chungking. All the same," he added wistfully, "I wish you were journeying there by road."

I retorted that neither my bones nor my pocket would stand that strain and he sighed heavily. "You were made for road travel."

I knew what he meant. Joe no less than myself was a Highway worshipper.

Now began the sorry business of saying good-bye to Kunming. Director Tan unbent so far as to issue me an official invitation to cross the Highway "when peace came". Mr. Wong gave me a list of all Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer films to be shown in the city over the next six months and asked if I would not like him to fetch the hairdresser "just once more". I was invited to smoke opium, to eat rich chow, to visit everybody all over

again; and I went to say farewell to a Chinese woman I knew who was sick.

Very rich her husband was, and both he and she had travelled widely in America and Europe, so that to all outward seeming they had adopted the ways and manners of the West. Soon after arrival in Kunming I had dined with them and been tremendously impressed by the pomp and ceremony of their home, a building of wide rooms set around a flower-filled courtyard. This time, however, the husband called for me and drove me in the opposite direction, and when I questioned him he smiled. "Ah, that was our *official* home, where we entertain; now we go to our private home as my wife lies ill."

It was a broken-down sort of place, the yard littered with straw and refuse, the windows deep glassless embrasures set in the thick walls, the rooms filled with a chaotic medley of books, lovely china, derelict furniture and spittoons. On a bed which was literally filthy lay my hostess. When last I had seen her she had worn a glimmering, iridescent silken robe, her glossy black hair had been curled high on her exquisite head, her tiny feet had been shod in gay lacquered slippers. Now her face looked yellow against the greyish pillow, the hair was dull and tangled, the tapering fingers lay stretched on the stained quilt. Every now and again she spat—and because of fever weakness her aim was bad—into one of the many receptacles which strewed the floor. None of them, I judged, had been emptied or cleaned for weeks and the stench in the room was appalling.

She was oblivious of her disgusting surroundings. For half an hour she murmured to me of the struggle to improve Chinese education, of the New Life Movement and its miracles, of the supreme importance of ridding her country of disease. A rat scabbled in a corner among some waste-papers and I stared, fascinated, at a little bug creeping up the quilt.

"It is so difficult for us few Chinese who have travelled to induce the people at home to accept Western standards of living," she whispered.

I said "Yes" mechanically and followed the progress of the bug.

I went on to the Chows, where Mrs. Chow introduced me to their little maid, a jolly, giggling child. "Servants are so difficult to get in Kunming, but this girl is very good, very friendly,

and Joe teaches her English. She comes from seven in the morning until five o'clock chow."

"And is it rude to ask what wages you pay?"

The maid was inordinately proud of her English, so answered for herself. "Five dollar I eat with you, eight dollar I sleep with you!"

We had some of the inevitable Ovaltine, and Joe walked back with me to Hsui Tsin Chieh in the dusk. "Only one day more," he said, "and that is most mournful, honoured guest. If I live to be very old I will yet remember how we laughed together."

I squeezed his arm. "Most honourable Chow, best friend in all China, there are still thirty-six hours left. Until the last one arrives let us forget the existence of time."

But when we parted outside the Calmette with promises to meet on the morrow misery overwhelmed me. Dear Joe, with his alert mind, his passion for efficiency, his strenuous beliefs in new gods and old. Without him I should never have reached Kunming; having known him I should be ever conscious of his absence.

There was a gentle scrape against the mosquito-netting and I opened the window. It was almost dark and the light from the room illuminated three faces, one human and two simian. Ching and the monkeys had come to say good-bye. The former's pock-marked face was very solemn and in one hand he held a peach. "Bigland!"

I bowed my thanks for the fruit, gave the monkeys a banana apiece to keep them quiet and leaned against the window, wishing for the first time that I could make speech with this man, tell him how much I had valued his kindness and his company, but even as we hugged hands and nodded our appreciation of each other he broke away and fled into the darkness of the garden, the monkeys capering at his heels, and presently a cry floated back on the wind, "Rom, Brinsi, Attins, Alexandria . . ."

VII

"This melancholy is very bad," said Cass decisively. "Have you finished your packing? Have you been to see the manager's wife at Hotel du Lac to order those lily bulbs? Are your tickets in order? Have you returned the Chinese dictionary lent to you by L——?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Do stop fussing! Listen, I went to see the H——s to-day. The state of their private house shocked me. I thought they were so highly educated, so very enterprising?"

"So they are, the best type one meets in China to-day. But do not imagine that *any* Chinese, high or low, rich or poor, lives according to Western standards. No matter how much they have travelled they always revert to the Chinese way of living when they settle down again at home."

"I see," but I didn't at all.

Cass began his questioning once more and this time elicited the information I had forgotten about the lily bulbs. "It is only seven o'clock; go now. I will drive you in the car."

The manager's wife at Hotel du Lac was an authority on lilies and promised to send a package home for me by sea. (Thanks to the outbreak of war, they are doubtless sprouting somewhere between Rangoon and Port Said.) "And Madame S—— wishes to see you."

I walked along the veranda and entered her room. Long ago Mrs. S—— had come to China with her husband, a high Government official, and had lived there all her married life. Widowed at the age of about sixty-five she had gone home but had been unable to settle down. "So I just pulled snooks at my children," she told me briskly, "and came out here again. I prefer to die in Kunming, thank you."

For myself I felt sure, and Joe shared my view, that the indomitable old lady would die in a rickshaw for each morning, wet or fine, she sallied forth through the city in one, a bony hand clutching a large ivory umbrella handle. Over seventy she was and racked with rheumatism, but her passion for China burned clear and fine within her. After the first air-raids the English community had done their utmost to send her home but she remained adamant, and this evening she blinked bird-

like eyes at me. "Well, you have guts—I do dislike people who apologize for the use of that honest English word. I'm not going to tell you how to find China's secret serenity, but I believe you'll do it. I'd like to travel that Highway, by the way. I must see young Joe Chow about it."

She was a grand person.

We had a lively dinner-party in the hotel and everybody gave me lists of shopping commissions to do in Hanoi and Rangoon, and said comfortably, "But you'll never stick Chungking. You'll be back in two days."

I shot dice and forgot about those dwindling thirty-six hours until C.N.A.C. sent a message to say that the plane would not start until 10 a.m. on the Monday. There were always respites in China.

We drove round the lakeside and watched the birds flashing in the sunlight, and picked the lotus flowers—but on that last day we did not speak of China. The Chows called. Owing to the shortage of petrol they would be unable to come and see me off, so, much to the scandalization of the hotel, Joe and I exchanged smacking kisses, and after that I was again so sunk in depression that the pilots suggested a bigger and better dinner-party.

Just then an aged Chinese walked in carrying a large bundle on his head. Setting this on the floor he unwrapped it and drew out rich coats of magic colours, sarongs embroidered in green and scarlet and gold, scarves of finest tissue. The pilots made a concerted dive for his wares, but I had eyes only for one sarong which had great sprays of palest pink flowers worked on its stiff black satin. Cass followed my gaze and coolly snatched it from M——, who was busy haggling over its price. "Want it?"

I nodded; I had never wanted anything quite so much.

Recklessly he snatched a thick blue silk dressing-gown and some other things from the pile, placed them on top of the sarong and said, "How much?"

M—— howled with indignation, the Chinese gabbled remonstrances, the others joined in; but finally I won my sarong and sat stroking it for the rest of the evening.

"And when you wear it you will remember Kunming."

I packed it carefully away in my suitcase. I was only taking a smaller case and the typewriter to Chungking, and picking up my main case on the way south. "I have another present

for you," said Cass, "but I shall not show it to you until the morning."

Just as we were leaving for the airport he gave it to me, a flowering cactus growing in a Chinese pot with the red soil of Yunnan around it. "See the one child in flower? Every year it gives birth to a child like that."

I looked full at him. "Why do you keep up this pretence of disliking China when all the time you understand her and love her?"

He made a little grimace. "Because it is better so. Maybe it is my French selfishness, but I have a real dread of becoming too absorbed by China, and every time I catch myself drifting into her ways I say flippant things about her and kick my coolies. To you I have been particularly devastating concerning her and her peoples for you were in similar danger. Ah, I know what you look for and believe with old Mrs. S—— you will find it, but when you came off the Highway you were so supremely *sure* and that was all wrong. Since then you have realized the prickliness of the cactus as well as the eternal beauty of its flower. In Chungking you may yet solve what you call the Chinese puzzle."

"I wonder? It is all so muddling, so confused. No sooner do I set the pieces in order than I lose some."

As we stepped into the car he said slowly, "In a way it would be infinitely better for you to go straight down to Hanoi. You are going to get so badly hurt, so terribly hurt."

I stiffened. "The Highway hurt me like that, yet I love it."

"La, la!" he teased. "How fierce you are," but his eyes were sombre.

To my own chagrin I clutched his arm and told him the story the dying surveyor had panted out to me near Lungling, the story I had deliberately tried to forget. "He said he had been stationed near Salween for three years in the bitter cold of winter and the burning heat of summer. He had left his wife in Hankow, and when he journeyed home at last on leave he found she had been raped by a Japanese soldier, had had a child and died. He told me he was glad he had suffered Salween, glad he had helped to make the Highway, glad he had been given the chance to die for China. Then he slumped on to my shoulder. He only spoke once more before he died; he said, 'I killed that

Japanese child'. Chungking can't show me anything more tragic than that surveyor, Cass."

"I am afraid it can. Listen to me, when you leave China stay for a while in Hanoi, in Saigon, in Bangkok, in anywhere gay and bright. I cannot quite explain, but the extreme contrast will help you to complete the Chinese puzzle."

I remember feeling more than a little irked. If Cass had only talked so seriously of China before instead of waiting until the last moment. "The Chiang Kai-sheks live in Chungking," I said. "It can't be so awful."

"No?" Deliberately he turned the conversation. By the time we reached the airport we were giggling like a couple of school children.

Chapter Twelve

CITY OF DESOLATION

I

THE civil airport was flooded so we left with a vast amount of hush-hush business from the military one. My fellow passengers were six Chinese and an extremely stout German who informed me he was a diamond merchant. Intrigued by thought of a diamond merchant touring the interior of China during a war, I tentatively asked him if there was much business about. "Oh, yes, many of the Mandarins are realizing their jewels, very beautiful ones they are too."

"Not *all* their jewels," murmured a little Chinese darkly, and remembering a still, golden face in Mangshih, I nodded. It would take more than all the aggression of which Japan was capable to make the autocrats of China disgorge their myriad treasures.

For an hour we stood in ankle-deep mud staring dejectedly at the ancient Douglas machine which was to carry us and at the war-planes surrounding us. "Those machines are made from soya," said somebody.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. Was there anything in China not made from soya? There were the edible beans themselves, there was the soya sauce sprinkled on every dish, now there were airplanes . . .

"Wonderful beans!" exclaimed the German. "I believe if you strewed your carpet with them they would grow."

The pilot appeared. He was Chinese, very small, very sure of himself, and he shouted strings of instructions at two apathetic mechanics. "English, yes? Right, you sit just behind me."

I should have preferred another seat, but hadn't the heart to argue, so crawled in, whereupon a minute individual snapped down the blinds—and they all snapped up again immediately because the catches had gone. There was a fearful row about



these blinds. "They must be down," shrieked the pilot, "otherwise the passengers will see our fighting machines."

Considering we had been studying these for the past sixty minutes his agitation seemed a little unnecessary, but eventually someone fetched a few tin-tacks and hammered blinds to window-frames. In the half-light I saw the Chinese passengers bore that look of resignation never achieved by an Occidental. The pilot wriggled into the cockpit, the propellers whirled, the plane wobbled madly as she taxied forward, I ripped the blind from the tin-tacks and stared out wondering if and how we should ever leave the ground.

I knew soon enough. I have never been so frightened in my life as I was during the next few hours. Below us lay the red hills and green forests of Yunnan, and they afforded no possible resting-place should the pilot's enthusiasm outweigh whatever sense of caution he possessed. He persisted in flying only a hundred feet up, he did spins, he went into slow rolls, he performed every kind of aerobatics known. With a French or English pilot maybe I could have borne these stunts, but this man was Chinese and very obviously a tyro at his job. By some miracle we wallowed our way north, the Chinese passengers growing greener each minute, the German shouting into my ear, "Air-raids are things I do not like, *hein*? Five of these commercial planes the Japs have shot down in the past few months. Terrible, terrible, what a death!"

I replied faintly that death would be welcome at the moment, but he tapped me sharply on the shoulder. "I have a Russian wife, we live near Peking. She is a very fine cook and I do not wish to die yet because then never again shall I taste her bortsch, her salmon pie, her Easter cakes. But these air-raids I do not like, no? When I reach Chungking I shall buy me a bicycle, then I can get out of the city quickly when danger threatens."

He quacked steadily on while we proceeded with our alarming contortions, and the steward and I had a battle royal over my blindless window. "Keep your seats, please!" roared the pilot. He was an optimist; thanks to his driving we had not been in them since leaving Kunming.

Apparently, I thought dismally, the Chinese preferred you to lose your life before reaching their capital, for now we were swooping down to an island in the Yangtze-Kiang river and it

seemed as if nothing could save us from being precipitated into that turbulent yellow flood. Somehow the pilot manoeuvred his machine directly above this island—then he dived, and I had not known the ground could come up and hit you so quickly. More dead than alive, I crawled out of the door. Below me lay a paddy-field! Exactly how the plane floated on this mass of green sticks and slime was beyond me, but the fact remained I had to wade through it to the oldest sampan in China.

We were all soaked to the waist by the time we struggled aboard the sampan. "And now," instructed the pilot, "please step aboard this magnificent seaplane."

I said to the German, "If the sampan is the oldest in China, that seaplane is the oldest in the world."

He frowned and shook his head. "A bicycle I must get!"

"Don't be silly. You can't ride a bicycle across a paddy-field or up the Yangtze?"

He lost his temper. "You talk too much! I mean, of course, when I reach Chungking."

Marching towards the seaplane, I answered acidly he'd better give up idea of that bicycle here and now for he would never see the capital.

I do not know the current of the Yangtze during the rains, but it reminded me of nothing so much as the race of the Hooghly below Calcutta. Anyway, to my horror the sampan towed the seaplane into midstream and then left it to take off against the current. Everything cracked ominously, the wings flapped, the struts snapped, but magically we wavered into the air. Ahead of us, perched on several hilltops, straggled a collection of buildings, many of them in ruins. "Chungking, our capital!" breathed the Chinese next to me.

II

Perhaps I had expected too much of Chungking. I had read such a lot about the city, learnt that it was now the centre of China's life, heard of the universities, the schools, the hospitals which had migrated to it. Firmly impressed on my mind had been the idea of a wonderful, flourishing centre of all the culture that was best in China.

Now I looked at a city of desolation. Only two months ago, after a furious succession of raids, Chungking had burned for three days and nights. There was no water, for the Yangtze was just too far away and the bamboo and other wooden houses caught like tinder when struck by incendiary bombs. Gradually the people, who had taken refuge behind the many hills, crept back to find themselves homeless. There was no bread, no light, no rice, and sometimes every few days, sometimes six times each day, the Japanese planes hurried from the East to rain death on the city. A few Government buildings in Western style, the pride of the Chinese, still stood serenely among the general wreckage, but the state of the vast population was pitiable.

I asked the airport official if there was a hotel. He shrugged his shoulders, said he could not remember whether any had survived the raids or not, and wandered away. I walked up to the German. "Where are you staying?"

He drew himself up. "With friends. And let me tell you, Madame, I am the good man, the family man, you understand?"

Even in Chungking I laughed at the outraged expression on his face.

One of our fellow-passengers tweaked me by the arm. "Go to the French Catholic Hospital," he whispered. "The nuns are very kind, they will let you in."

I thanked him. Once again then I was to stay in a hospital in China, and my spirits rose as I remembered the sweetness of the Calmette gardens. "Can you get a rickshaw here?"

He thought that most doubtful. "But I can show you the way. It is rather far."

We set off, he with his kitbag slung over his shoulder, I with case and typewriter. In Kunming it had been pleasant summer weather except for frequent storms, but here a brazen sun beat down out of a cloudless sky, blistering my back, making my head swim. And underfoot there was dust, dust, dust. It swirled in yellow clouds round my ankles as I walked, it silted into my shoes, it powdered my light skirt. On we plodded and on, along an endless yellow road. Everything was yellow, thanks to the dust, the few houses, the bare hilltops, even the scratchy grass. Grimly I reflected I preferred the red mud of Yunnan to the yellow dust of Szechwan. "Many kilometres," my companion wagged his head.

The sun was setting by the time we reached the city. There were tramlines but no trams, there were marvellous electric light standards but no lamps, there were buildings with gaping holes in them and shops without windows, and all around us were crowds of drifting apathetic people in rags and tatters begging for a little food. Every one begged in Chungking, but their manner was hopeless, for they knew too well their requests would be in vain. The children had the distended stomachs which follow starvation, and most of the men and women had filthy pieces of rag tied round festering wounds caused by bomb splinters. Horribly familiar signs showed on their faces and bodies, leprosy, syphilis, gonorrhea, scurvy, eczema, impetigo.

I dropped case and typewriter with a bang. "I cannot go on," I said helplessly.

There was a rush and scurry and the crowd fell upon my baggage. "Hold it!" shouted my companion. "If you leave one thing for an instant they will steal it."

I picked up my load with difficulty and stood dumbly among the horde of starving Chinese. A man with his nose eaten away by lupus thrust his face close to mine and howled imprecations, a woman brandished aloft a naked baby who seemed nothing but skin and bone, a leper tried to seize my Shan bag. "Come along," my friend tugged at my arm. "If you walk on steadily they will not touch you."

Still I stood irresolute. How could one march past this ghastly army if one had any humanity at all? The stench from their rags filled my nostrils, the clamour of their speech filled my ears, the sight of their eyes burning from emaciated, diseased faces sent a wave of nausea through me. But eventually I walked on; there was nothing I could do for them.

We reached a long high wall, and the Chinese stopped at a little door and pointed. I knocked and a Sister poked her head out. "Please, Sister, may I lodge here for the night?"

She smiled sweetly—I remember feeling amazed that anybody could smile in Chungking—and invited me to enter, but there was no garden, only a bare dusty yard. "I am sure the Reverend Mother will let you stay. We have few foreign visitors now and we have patients everywhere, but room will be found."

The Reverend Mother greeted me warmly. Of course I could stay, but she feared all the beds were full with wounded from

recent air-raids, so would I mind sleeping in a bath? Walking beside her as she moved soft-footed through the wards, bending over the twisted forms of her patients, speaking gently to those who moaned ceaselessly, I knew that for the second time in my life I had met a true saint, and impulsively I told her, "I met a White Father in Africa once who was like you."

"There are many of us," she answered gently, and went on to speak of her work in Chungking. For the past year she and the Sisters had laboured night and day to help the air-raid victims, the people suffering from the ills which follow exposure, starvation, rape and shock. "But we have so little room, the people are often frightened to come to us, there is no money and the worst thing we have to treat is the terror of the Chinese, for with every raid it breaks out afresh. One cannot blame them, they have suffered so much they are broken in mind and spirit."

She would accept no money for my board and lodging, saying it was against her rules and I could feed myself outside; but she took gratefully a contribution towards her funds and said, "If you are only staying a few days one thing you can do for me, take a very sick Frenchman down with you to Hanoi when you go. He was brought to us with double pneumonia but he already had a very bad stomach wound—a relic of the Argonne in 1914—and now his heart has nearly given out. But perhaps, Madame, it is too much to ask you? Some ladies are worried by illness."

I thought of the little nigger boys. "No," I answered slowly, "sickness does not worry me. Can I see him now?"

She led me along a corridor, lined with wounded Chinese on either side, to a tiny room. "M. C——, here is an English visitor."

He was dark and unshaven and terribly thin. Only his eyelids flickered as he welcomed me courteously, but when Reverend Mother told him I proposed to convey him to Hanoi he struggled to sit upright. "You will be an angel from heaven if you do that," he panted. "My wife and two children live in our home at Saigon. I shall recover if only I can reach there."

I talked to him for a short time, but any effort exhausted him and presently Reverend Mother signalled me to depart. "You will see her again later, she will not run away."

Back in the corridor she sighed, "Perhaps it is wrong of me,

but I am distressed we have no time to attend to him properly. We are so short-staffed I can spare nobody to shave him or sit beside him."

"Can't I do that?"

She beamed upon me. "It would be most kind. Now come along and see your bath and have a little food with me this evening."

As we ate I marvelled anew at the courage and humility of this delicately nurtured woman. Our supper consisted of noodle soup, a little tough cabbage and some dry rice-cakes, our conversation was punctuated by the cries, groans and sobs of the patients, every other minute a Sister came in with some request. Bandages had run out, such-and-such a drug was getting low, a batch of twenty Chinese who had been hiding wounded in the hills since the last raid had just come in and there was no room for them, a woman had just died in child-birth outside the hospital wall. Serenely Reverend Mother made light of difficulties, arranged makeshift beds, teased the tired Sisters in her soft voice. But when we were alone for a moment she said, "Now you see what Chungking is like. We can get so few medical or food supplies and the want is terrific."

"Don't the Government help you? Look what you are doing for their people."

The face under the white coif changed suddenly, became severe. "Suffering does not count in China. In a few hospitals nearer the Front the Guerrilla Armies' soldiers are fairly well treated because they are of vital use to the country. Of what use are a few hundred thousand coolies in Chungking?"

I went back to the Frenchman and shaved him by candlelight. "Thank you," he said gravely, "my little name is Charles."

"Very well, Charles, now I will wash you."

How he had lived after his war wound I did not know, yet he had done so for twenty-five years despite severe operations for adhesions. For twelve months he had worked in Chungking for an Indo-China firm. "But I'm finished now," he said. "I spit blood and my heart has gone. I tell you, this city is hell upon earth. If I can get back to Saigon perhaps I'll get better."

I did not think he would reach Hanoi. He was forty-seven; he had the wasted body of a man twice that age. If he moved from cot-bed to chair he had a breathless heart-attack so fierce

that it seemed impossible for him to recover. If he coughed suddenly he had a hæmorrhage.

Originally he had been a rice miller in Saigon with a thriving business. Idly I asked him the sort of foolish question one does ask. "Did you ever know my uncle, C—— D——?"

"Of course, he sold me my machinery."

After that Charles perked up. The remote, twenty-year-old connection was a bond. "Up to a year ago I was a strong man—but Chungking gets every one down in the end. Wait until to-morrow, we are sure to have raids then and you will see for yourself the appalling state of affairs. The Chinese—bah!"

"I am very fond of the Chinese."

He stared at me, round-eyed. "They are lower than dogs! Go to the nitrate mines and watch babies of four or five being lowered into the cesspool pits to clean them out. Stay here in Chungking and watch the cruelty, the torture, the awful indifference . . ."

He snatched at his throat as the breathlessness seized him once more and a Sister appeared with a hypodermic. "You must rest now," she told him.

He held tightly to my hand. "You won't . . . run . . . away?"

"No, I shall come again and attend to you in the morning."

Still the hospital resounded with hideous noises and still the figures in the long corridor writhed on their quilts. Next to my bath lay a woman who had lost her husband, her three children and both legs from the thigh in one of the May raids. She was quite mad—who could wonder?—and the night long she babbled frantically for her lost ones. Huddled in my bath I tried to sleep, tried to shut out memory of that awful crowd seen on the way into the city, memory of the patients who screamed and moaned, memory of Charles with his heart, his lungs, his twisted, puckered torso. Suddenly I remembered Director Tan's words: "*. . . on the way here you travelled in luxury: you saw no tragedy.*"

He had known, of course; I had not seen Chungking.

III

For the next four days I prowled about the city of desolation. Always it lay under the brazen sun; always above it wheeled the vultures in search of their prey, and by the roadsides lay heaps of clean-picked human bones and queerly blackened limbs that even those birds refused to touch.

I was washing Charles the first morning when the sirens screamed through the hot air and first the green and then the red Very lights went up. "What the devil is that?"

He smiled grimly. "You will know in exactly fifteen minutes. Take my advice and go out. Keep behind the little hill across the field at the back and go on your face if things get too hot."

I had not seen a Japanese raid and it wasn't my war anyway, so I slopped out in Charles' Chinese slippers. Down the street poured thousands of Chinese, livid faces upturned to the sky, lips chattering with fear. Out of the east came ten planes, fifteen, twenty, thirty, and as the drone of their engines grew stronger the crowds stopped as though paralyzed, but I gained the little hill and looked down at the immediate section of the city which consisted of one long narrow street and countless intersecting alleyways. The planes dived, an explosion thundered far to the right, an incendiary bomb sent a fountain of flame leaping into the clear air, the Chinese planes circled the city from the west, swerving to avoid pursuit until one whose pilot was apparently wishful of joining his ancestors climbed above an enemy plane and fired. The plane hurtled down to earth and burst into flames, setting alight to a whole street in the process. The clamour was deafening as the anti-aircraft guns opened fire, but I forgot personal danger and stared stupidly at the street. Where the crowd had streamed past just a few moments ago was a scene of indescribable ghastliness. A line of houses burned furiously, and in front of them were scattered bodies, limbs, heads, feet . . .

And all the time death rained out of the sky. I slid on my stomach down that little hill and pressed my face to the yellow dust.

Half an hour later noise died. The guns still pooped hopefully but the menacing drone had disappeared to the east, so cautiously

I crawled to the top of the hill once more as the "all clear" sounded. Down in the street an army of tiny boys were busy sweeping entrails into buckets with little brooms, and as I walked towards them a harassed-looking officer appeared. "You were not frightened, I trust, Madame?" he asked in good English.

Frightened! What was fear beside the shambles alongside us?

I pointed to the boys. "That is a terrible task for those children."

He scratched his head. "Oh, they do not mind, and it was not a bad raid this time, only this one bomb which did real damage."

Trying to stop my voice from shaking I croaked, "How many do you think are dead?"

"Maybe five hundred or so. I must go now and arrange for coffins." He saluted and strode away.

I advanced up the street. All around me pressed the relatives come to identify their dead, women with scared, haggard faces, women who wept piteously, men with jagged wounds from bomb splinters, children who screamed for father or mother. To the Chinese it is very necessary that a body should be buried whole, so when a victim proved minus some portion of his or her anatomy the relations dashed to the ever-growing pile of human remains on the smouldering ground, picked out the required piece and fitted it on to their dead. I saw a man's body topped by the head of a child of seven, I saw a woman with one male arm, I saw other things on that brilliant morning in Chungking that will haunt me always. I went back to the hospital and said to Charles, "It is mass murder, awful, incredible."

He pointed downwards. "Look at your feet."

I stared dully. Up to the ankles they were covered in blood.

There were two more raids that day within the space of a few hours, and the worst part to me was that one became inured to horror. By late afternoon I was really growing quite fretful with the Chinese because they hadn't the common sense to take cover behind the humpy small hills but insisted upon herding together in the narrow streets gazing up at destruction.

A pall of smoke from the burning houses covered the city and gave slight relief from the blazing sun, but the place stank of death, and as evening fell so an eerie moaning rose on the night wind—Chungking was again mourning its dead.

IV

On the second day, which proved free from raids, I saw the other Chungking, the capital city which housed the very soul of New China.

Armed with certain letters of introduction I sallied forth in the direction of the Government buildings, the tramlines, all the evidences of an elegant and Western culture. The people walked slowly through the devastated streets with bowed heads, for apathy held them in its relentless grip and here, more than anywhere else in China, did one find pessimism as to the final outcome of the war. Obese and elderly generals took the air in American cars, Government officials drank a great deal of tea, the few foreigners made enormous profits out of the usual rubbish, here was Kunming all over again—but with a difference because, dominating this half-ruined city, towering above the want, the misery, the death, the greed, was the figure of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, and once one had seen that fine gentle face one knew instinctively that this man and nobody else would lead China in the right direction.

Dreamer, visionary, leader, he sat in a clean bare building and set every nerve in his wonderful brain at the service of his people. The events of the past two years had drawn a network of fine lines on his face and he looked seventy-two instead of fifty-two; but his mind was sharp as a sword. For months he would disappear with his guerrilla armies; then he would return to Chungking to plot and plan and confer with his Government and his generals.

A man very near to him said: "We work for the re-creation of an Empire and to make the Generalissimo the first Emperor of a new dynasty."

But as I studied Chiang Kai-shek I hoped sincerely that such a move would never come to pass. He was no Emperor, this quiet, studious man with the eyes of a dreamer. He was innately simple, a man of the people, and if the powerful set of bureaucrats who ran most of China at the moment set him up with tremendous ceremony as Emperor of the vast land they would utterly destroy his powers for he would stifle in such an atmosphere. At present,

and against colossal odds, he was struggling to bring not only unity but peace and plenty to his country, and, thanks to his own vision and that of Sun Yat Sen, he was making slow if painful progress.

He lived austere, thinking far more of the mass of the Chinese people than ever his underlings did—that was partly the trouble, he stood so alone when he demanded this, that and the other for the coolies. Yet even he could not quite understand why he should set any value on human life, and simply did not realize the horror of hundreds of thousands of peasants being swept to death by the Yangtze floods that would also sweep the Japanese back to Nanking. For him as for his fellow countrymen there were “four hundred million coolies in China, each coolie a potential soldier.”

Behind him, guiding his schemes and undoubtedly helping him enormously by infusing practice into his theory, stood Madame Chiang Kai-shek, a lithe figure fashioned out of steel. What she had done for her husband and for China was incalculable and her energy was astonishing, yet she lacked one essential quality—humanity.

Perhaps it was as well that she did.

One admired her enormously, this exquisite, still-faced woman of thirty-six; one could not imagine anybody in the world loving her, nor could one imagine her ever having any tender feelings of her own. Relentless, vital, possessed of remarkable tenacity of purpose, she laboured for China, but surrounding her was enough spurious clap-trap about movements and leagues and what-nots to defeat the most ardent idealist, and my own personal feeling was that side by side with her real desire to save China marched a burning longing for power.

That last remark will be treated as heresy by my Chinese friends; probably rightly so, because I was only a brief spectator of the endless tragedy at present being enacted in Chungking. But as an outsider that is what I felt—therefore I set it down. I even go further and say that I also felt, very, very strongly indeed, that the present big powers in China, who are some of them members of the Soong family and all of them in their immediate circle, scarcely emulate the selflessness of the Generalissimo. Time and again, both in Chungking and in Kunming, I had a vaguely uneasy feeling that the aims of the idealistic

Chiang Kai-shek were being slowly dragged down to a commercial level—and ideals cannot breathe beside commerce.

On the other hand, much fine work has been done, and still is being done by the all-powerful in China. The country needs all her resources during this war and they are the men—and woman—to exploit those resources to the best possible advantage. But never in their company did one feel the sense of oneness with the people one felt when watching Chiang Kai-shek. He simply was China. Looking at him, I prayed he might remain China, and as I scanned his sad face the lament for Manchuria echoed in my brain:

“My home has gone,
My Mother lies broken on the ground,
My Father slaves for his oppressors. . . .”

There seemed to be an immense amount of wasted activity going on in and around Chungking. “We must show you our roads,” they said proudly, and drove me at break-neck speed along boulevard after boulevard circling the city.

“But why build all these fine roads when your city is bombed almost daily and is half in ruins already?”

“Ah, but when peace comes we shall build a fine new city round the roads.”

Carts before horses once more.

On every hand coolies were busy demolishing half-ruined houses by the simple expedient of tying ropes round the main bamboo struts and pulling on them. In a pitiful attempt to save their smouldering homes men and women staggered past laden with kerosene tins full of water. Down the street tripped a party of young girls dressed in European frocks and carrying tennis acquets under their arms—a sight you would never see in any other Chinese city, for only in Chungking has youth become so converted to Western standards. I said: “That is rather admirable. In the middle of constant raids they still play tennis.”

My companion looked sulky. “I think it very stupid myself. They have no tennis courts. What is the use of playing tennis without a court?”

“But they looked cheerful; that is surely the main thing?”

"Why? I see no sense in smiling when death falls on us from the sky."

Most people felt that way in Chungking; you couldn't blame them either.

They showed me over a military hospital, and over Government buildings, and over colleges where earnest Chinese sat in serried ranks studying abstruse subjects. Certainly it was wonderful what educational progress was being made on all sides, but always I was lured back to the city itself with its hundreds of thousands of starving, wounded, homeless inhabitants. They seemed to count so much more than a handful of well-to-do boys and girls mugging up mathematics.

So soon as I could, therefore, I eschewed authority as escort and wandered round the poorer quarters by myself. In the dimness of a ruined temple I almost stumbled over a squatting figure, a priest who had been dead twenty years. According to his code he had taken up this position when he felt the approach of death and refrained from eating or drinking until he expired. Embalmed by his brethren in oil, his body had to remain where it was until the joss-man said the gods wished him buried, so here he squatted, immobile oily face upturned to the sky, mute reminder of a China which had been old when the rest of the world was young.

I leaned against the remains of a pillar and peered down at him. He bore an expression of ineffable disdain, and I could not help thinking how queer it was that the modern machines which showered their bombs so frequently had missed him and taken so many living instead. Putting out a finger, I touched his hand. It was cold, snake-like despite the warmth of the air, and on the flat face it seemed as though disdain turned to anger. I turned away abruptly; there was enough new death in Chungking without gazing at that priest.

V

After the sixth or seventh raid the woman in the bed next to my bath died. I knew relief; there was one less patient to scream and rave so soon as the sirens sounded. Completely unnerved by their experiences half the hospital raved madly while the enemy planes were bombing the city, and when fresh casualties were brought in many of them tried to kill themselves. Squatting in the sun in the courtyard beside Charles' chair, I thought the death they feared from bombs was preferable either to suicide or to the pitiful maimed existence they must live if they partially recovered. "I'm going out," I said abruptly, "to get something to eat."

That was pure fiction. The eating-houses were poor places and food was very scarce, but even when I found a proprietor willing to supply me with chow I could not force it down my throat because it tasted of death, and I felt perfectly sure that if one of the many limbs scattered about proved fairly free from disease he would pop it into the copper and thus enrich his soup. Every day I made myself swallow a bowlful of rice and a few pallid vegetables, but usually I had to beat a hasty retreat round the nearest corner and be sick.

This particular morning I trudged through the yellow dust wondering how on earth Charles had lived as much as a year in this fearful city which smelt of death. Burning heat in the summer, bitter cold in the winter, air-raids as an accompaniment to life. I shooed the vultures from a fairly fresh corpse and walked on, feeling that my sanity would go if I stayed here much longer. A Chinese in European dress stopped me. "Madame, could you please assist me? I am a Government official and I am trying to discover the nationality and identity of the pilot of a Japanese plane brought down this morning."

What was a little more death? I nodded and followed him across a field scored with bomb marks to the twisted wreckage of the plane. By some odd chance the pilot's body had scarcely been touched. His neck was broken and his head lay at an acute angle, but otherwise he appeared fairly normal. The official dug his hand into his tunic pocket and drew out a bundle of letters and a stamped card, which he handed to me. Carefully I looked

through them, trying to decipher the cramped handwriting of the letters, most of which were written in French. Presently I handed them back. "His name is Pietro Pavone. He comes from Naples and his card says he is thirty-three years of age."

But I did not tell the official how Pietro was married a year back to a French girl who obviously adored him, how she was going to have a baby in two months' time, how she was "so thankful that the Japanese are paying you such big money and have promised you shall not fly fighting machines. Every night I pray to the Holy Virgin that we shall have a son."

I looked down on Pietro Pavone. A typical Neapolitan, handsome, olive-skinned with a full amorous mouth. He hadn't wanted to go to war, this Pietro, he had wanted to make a lot of money quickly and take it home to the French wife. But the little yellow men had tricked him—what was a pilot to do so far from home? Lose his job or do what he was told? Well, he wouldn't see his son now.

"May I keep one of those letters?"

The official looked shocked. "Oh, no, Madame, they are for our files."

He thanked me for my interpretation and I turned back to the hospital. A pity he had not let me keep a letter. I had a fancy to write to that poor small Suzette in Naples and tell her gently about Pietro. And yet, perhaps it was better not.

But I told Charles the story. "He looked serene, Charles, I'd like Suzette to have known that bit."

He smiled. "All that matters to her, poor child, is that her man is dead. She has not visited Chungking like you, has not developed into a connoisseur of bodies. You like your death 'nice'; neat and straight and tidy."

I lit a cigarette. "Is there anything else we can talk about in this damned city? No, nothing. Just death, death, death!"

But presently I threw the cigarette away. "I saw something else this morning when that Chinese official drove me to the Yangtze. On the muddy yellow ground by the bank were about fifty lepers and they were in such a ghastly state I tried not to look at them yet felt I just had to—you know that loathsome feeling? The official said placidly that in a moment or two men would come with whips and drive them into the water to drown lest they spread infection to thousands of healthy people."

I didn't believe him but it was true, and the most frightful part was that the lepers did not scream or fight, simply floundered and crawled to their death. At least I think that was the most frightful part, maybe the whistle of the whips was worse."

He laid a hand on my shoulder. "In three days we shall be gone. Did you book our passages definitely this morning?"

"Yes, by Eurasia. I refuse to fly behind another Chinese pilot. The plane leaves at dawn on Tuesday. I'm going out again, I shan't be long."

The truth was I couldn't sit still for more than half an hour at a stretch. All day I wandered aimlessly about Chungking, taking shelter how and where I could when the raid warnings sounded, averting my gaze as much as possible from subsequent sights. Nerves, of course, silly ones at that, but Charles' only alternative topic of conversation, that of an imminent war in Europe, did not make me feel any better. Would I live to see my own children torn to little pieces by bombs as were these Chinese children? Morosely I walked on, kicking up the yellow dust with my feet.

I hated this place, hated the hospital with its groaning load of humanity, hated the vultures and the officials and the coffin-makers who knocked and hammered the day long at their revolting task. A soldier stopped me, laughing all over his face. "Such a queer sight, come and see."

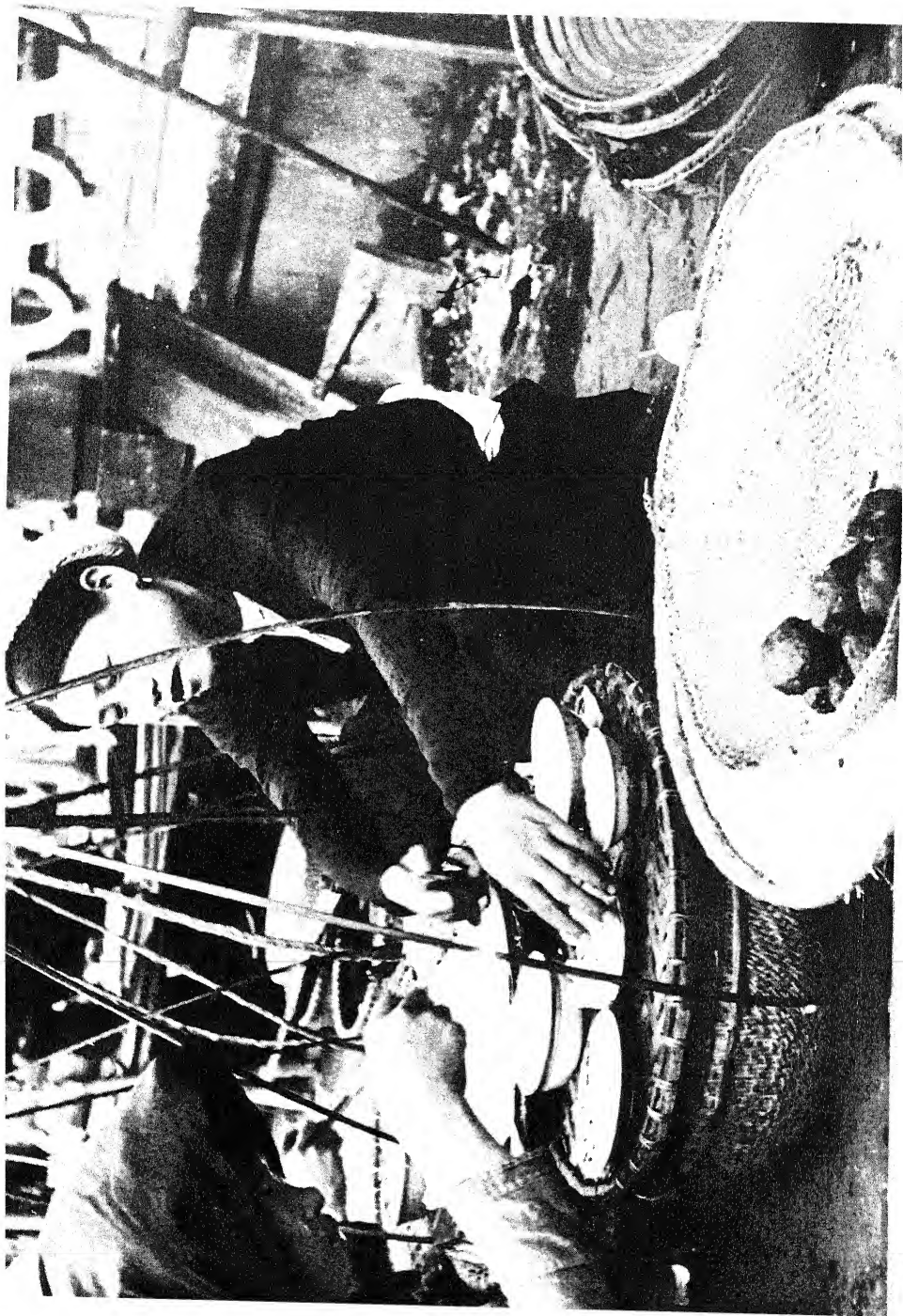
"No, thank you." Memory of the Italian pilot was yet fresh.

"Ah, but yes. All caused by displacement of air!"

Air didn't sound so bad. He led me to a high mound of earth thrown up in a courtyard, tiptoed round it and waved his hands proudly. The place had been a dug-out and had suffered a direct hit. Now that the earth had been shovelled away twenty completely naked Chinese bodies lay revealed, the clothing stripped clean off them by the air displacement. I turned my back and marched away. The soldier ran after me. "Is not that interesting? Tell me, you are English? I speak very good, do I not?"

"Yes, very."

I could not shake him off. He pattered after me, making idiotic remarks about English grammar until I could have screamed and beaten my head against the wall as the women did in the hospital. The sirens sounded and he broke into a



run, dragging me behind him. "Here, here, under this archway!"

There was another occupant of the archway, a pregnant woman who lay crouched in a heap, her face drawn with pain. "Help me with her," I commanded the soldier, but he shrank back.

"Leave her there, Madame, she is all right."

I believe I called him terrible names. Sweating and gasping, I pulled her by the armpits farther under the archway although that really wasn't any good as, if we did suffer a direct hit, we would be killed outright. My hand touched something warm and sticky, and bending down I examined her. From shoulder to elbow of the left arm ran a deep flesh wound, and her right breast was almost severed from her body. She must have been wounded in the last raid and crept under the arch with her last atom of strength.

The lights flared and the guns boomed and once again the menacing drone came from the east. The woman's face was spattered with sweat and her body performed horrible contortions. Very soon now her child would be born. The bombs crashed, the earth shook, I sat cross-legged in the dust and worked as I had seldom worked before. Death was all around us, but it seemed suddenly so unimportant beside the mysterious, awe-inspiring fact of birth. Yet that was ridiculous. Either the child would be an idiot or it would grow up in time for the next war . . . there was always a next war. And the mother would die, it was a miracle she had lived even a few hours. . . .

The soldier crouched near us, whistling some silly tune which set my teeth on edge. Abruptly he stopped. "That is the end, Madame. The Japanese are going."

I sat back on my heels and stared at the squirming, newborn child in my lap. It looked so yellow, so strangely yellow.

VI

Three mornings later I looked again at that Chinese child. The mother had been dead before I could run back to the hospital with the baby to fetch help, but curiously enough the tiny Chinese boy was a lusty creature. I really took quite a vicarious pride in him and he was the only part of Chungking I was sorry to leave. "Your plane is delayed then?" asked a Sister, and when I answered it was not now leaving until the morrow she sighed, "More raids."

"Yes, and for the next one M. C—— must go by sedan-chair to the French Consul's dug-out, otherwise he won't live. His nerves are all to bits and he has had two bad attacks already to-day."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Ah, I do hope he reaches Saigon alive."

I hoped so too, very much so. I had grown very attached to Charles and knew all about the wife and children awaiting him in Indo-China; but I doubted greatly if he would stand the journey. However, at the next warning we would have him carried across to that nice deep dug-out in the Consul's garden. (Since then this dug-out has been destroyed by Japanese bombs with considerable loss of life.)

Wandering back to the courtyard, I lay down in a long chair and discussed with Charles how we should get to the airport. "Perhaps the Consul will lend us a car?"

"Perhaps there is no petrol?" he answered dryly.

A siren wailed. "You had better throw on some clothes," he urged, for the morning was so hot I was wearing only a pair of Cass's pink silk pyjamas and Chinese slippers.

"If I'm going to be killed, my dear Charles, I do not see what difference dress makes. Now I'm going to call the boys to bring your chair."

They were brutes of boys. They whined with fear, they demanded dollars, they shouted abuse until I was driven to do a thing I had often sworn I never should do, kick a coolie. Taking off my right shoe, I delivered two good jabs on their behinds with my bare foot, yelling "*Pegu!*" with venom as I did so. They broke into a trot, bumping poor Charles into a

heart-attack, and I trailed behind clutching the Shan bag which contained my passport and our air-tickets. Somehow we reached the dug-out just as inferno broke loose above us.

The stuffy darkness of the place was unendurable. French and Chinese crowded together, sobbing, moaning, yelping in hysteria. "I can't stand this," I whispered to the man next to me and wormed my way to the sandbags guarding the entrance. Wriggling past these, I stumbled up some steps and gained the air. The very wrath of the gods seemed to thunder from the heavens—this was far the worst raid we had had. Slithering and sliding in my silly flapping slippers, I made my way down the street and towards me, tiny fat legs peddling for dear life, came the German diamond merchant on his bicycle! The sweat was pouring down his pallid face as he bumped over the cobbles, but the sight did me an immense amount of good, for I leaned back against the wall and laughed until I cried.

I didn't laugh ten minutes later when a crowd of about two hundred Chinese standing at a corner some hundred yards ahead of me were blown to bits by a bomb. Stupidly I watched limbs flying through the air, then plopped on my face in a mess of goat-dung and dust.

That raid seemed to go on and on. In reality it lasted about an hour. I started to shuffle back to the hospital, a woeful sight in filthy pyjamas. I lost one shoe and couldn't find it, I skirted the tiny boys at their loathsome task of filling buckets, I was sick twice; and when I reached the haven of the little door in the wall it was to find a mad rabble of Chinese pouring out of it. Some of them waved towels, others loaves of bread. Some carried cases of medicines and surgical instruments, others staggered under the weight of beds and mattresses. Open-mouthed I stood aside and watched the strange procession until it had straggled off down the street and all that remained was the echo of its yells and most of the hospital's cotton-wool lying in the dust.

The Reverend Mother appeared, her beloved face white and haggard. "Poor things, they looted the hospital. They were starving, homeless, crazy with fear."

I followed her through the courtyard. The looting had certainly been thorough. Beds had been snatched from under patients, the food stores were completely rifled, the wards looked

as if a hurricane had swept them, and the sick men and women clamoured to know what had happened. I walked towards my bath and looked for my case and typewriter. The latter was there, safe and sound; the former was not. Frantically I scoured the ward, then the other wards, then the corridors. The staff joined in but not a sign of the case was to be seen anywhere. In it had been securely locked the dollar bills which represented my whole wealth, not to mention half this manuscript and some garments. I stared up at Reverend Mother. "That is that. I hope the money helped them, but I have an air-ticket to Hanoi, a passport, five *piastres* and a pair of borrowed pyjamas."

Chapter Thirteen

OUT OF CHINA

I

CHARLES and I must have presented a queer contrast as we drove to the airport in the dawn light. He wore an elegantly cut white suit, immaculate linen and beautiful new suede shoes, and he also sported a monocle. I wore Cass's pyjamas (washed but not ironed by a kindly Sister), and odd Chinese slippers (one borrowed from the doctor to replace the one lost in the raid), and carried my Shan bag in one hand and a hypodermic full of digitalis for Charles in the other.

Our pilot was an exceedingly large German who greeted us warmly and informed us he was going to knock the hell out of the Japanese Consulate when he reached Hanoi. "Two months ago they brought me down on the Indo-Chinese border on the way up to Kunming, killed three passengers, put a bullet through the tank and peppered me in the shoulder. Three days I had to sit in a damned swamp until help came, and then my wound suppurated."

Ecstatically I clasped the hypodermic to my bosom and implored him to make the hell good and strong.

Together with several apathetic and shivering Chinese, we climbed aboard the Junker. "Do you do any of those seaplane stunts?" I inquired delicately of the German.

"My God, no, only the Chinese risk their necks at that game."

I knew profound relief as we sailed through the bright morning to Yunnan Province. I was leaving Chungking for ever, leaving the dust and the stench and the death which was omnipresent in that ill-fated capital. Yet if I had not seen Chungking? In my heart I knew Cass had been right and that she had taught me more of China than even the Highway had taught me. Then my mind reverted to memory of those gay little girls I had seen tripping off to play tennis without a court. Were they still alive,

those children, or were they too blown to the four winds of heaven?

I should never know the answer to that question—nobody provided answers to Chungking happenings.

Beside me Charles panted for breath. Not at all sure I was giving him the correct amount of digitalis and cursing the bumping of the Junker, I pinched the flesh of his forearm and plunged the needle into it. For a short while he was easier, but before we floated down towards Kunming lake he had had a heart-attack and I despaired of ever getting him to Hanoi.

"How long do we wait here?" I yelled to the German.

"Hour and a half," he yelled back.

Cass was waiting on the tarmac. Leaving Charles to the tender mercies of the airport officials, I walked towards him, tears streaming down my face. "It's so silly to weep, but I'm so tired of death."

He gave me a large soft handkerchief and comforted me, produced my case, found me a dressing-gown, even made up my face for me. Finally he brought me the cactus and removed its brown-paper wrappings. "Carry it with you," he said gently, "look at it and forget Chungking."

"Nobody ever could do that. You were so right, Cass, but I still can't get any perspective on the Chinese puzzle. Chungking has made my view of it yet more cock-eyed. Indeed, I think it's destroyed my optic nerve or something. An hour ago I thought the only thing which mattered in life was that I had escaped from it; now I would make a bolt for a plane back to it if one were here. I don't want to leave China. *I will not leave China!*"

"Remember what I said?" soothed Cass. "Stay in Hanoi and in a little time you will understand."

But I felt completely disintegrated. Between reiterating my refusal to leave China I gabbled incoherently of air-raids, of lepers, of the baby I had helped into the world. Cass listened quietly until the pilot strolled up and said it was time we took our seats. "Come along," he took me firmly by the arm.

I said, "No, I'm not going."

He twisted me round so that I saw the shimmering lake and the red ribbon of the Highway looped around it. "You will come back; it is all arranged."

Still I whined. I couldn't manage Charles as far as Hanoi, I couldn't bear to leave China.

"Yes you can do both those things and in a few months' time you will know why you did them. When you stand well away from China you will learn her secret."

I snivelled my way on board and took my seat. As the engines whirred I stared out at Cass's smiling face. It was the last thing I saw as the Junker rose and made southwards for the border, and for the next two hours I sat nursing the cactus on my lap, enduring an agony of mind beside which my pain at leaving the Highway faded into insignificance.

II

Someone tapped my shoulder. Resentful at such disturbance of my woe, I turned and looked into the eyes of Mr. Lee from Pao Shan.

Without studying my words, I said abruptly, "You told me the truth; there is no unity in China—yet."

His smile was strained. "So you believe unity will come?"

"Yes, but not for many, many years. You do things slowly in China."

He sighed. "You may see it yet, for I overheard that Frenchman saying you would return. You are more fortunate than I."

The pain inside of me lessened a trifle. "What do you mean?"

Somehow he had fallen foul of the Government department for which he worked, and while his family remained in Pao Shan he was travelling down to Indo-China in search of a new job. "It is virtual exile," he said; then his sweet smile lit his face. "But who am I to complain? Nothing can ever take memory of my country away from me."

We must have realized at that point, I think, the appalling results which were bound to follow if we persisted in such emotional revelations, for we began to speak hurriedly of "all the fun in the world", of the Pao Shan temple and of dear Joe Chow.

Below us the red hills of Yunnan gave place to great stretches of swampland which glittered evilly in the sunlight.

"I hate Junkers," I said to Mr. Lee, "they always look as if

they were made out of old bits of corrugated iron, the seats are uncomfortable, the wings flap, they're terribly noisy."

He teased me: "Yet you enjoyed travelling in a Stewart bus?"

Melancholy took possession of me once more. Was there any need to remind me of that miraculous journey across the Highway? But he went on to ask where I was going to stay in Hanoi and for how long, and I answered grandly that cables had already been sent arranging my passage and that within a day or so I should be on my way to Rangoon.

"There is only an air service by Imperial Airways twice a week," he reminded me. "You have missed to-day's plane so you will have to wait. Never mind, Hanoi is a very gay city."

I didn't want any gay city. "There are Air France services as well, and there are always ships."

So, in my innocence, I dismissed thought of enforced sojourn in Indo-China and for the remainder of our flight had to give all my attention to Charles, who turned green each time we climbed to over five thousand feet. "You'll have to keep low," I warned the pilot, so we bumped and thudded above the marshlands and the Chinese groaned in sickness.

At last we saw the city spread flatly on the land ahead of us. "Metropole Hotel," gasped Charles as we came down, but I was busy wondering how on earth Hanoi managed to exist for it seemed to float among the paddy-fields in some astonishing manner.

We stepped out into a Turkish bath. The airport belonged to Air France and was a desolate place some six miles from the city where unshaven Frenchmen played cards, smoked and ate ham sandwiches. There was a polite Passport Officer and a drooping individual who chalked our baggage wearily; otherwise there was no sign of life. The pilot came up to me. "There is a car waiting for you and M. C——."

That was something, but I wanted to see an official about my passage to Rangoon.

"I do not think you will find one here."

Just then a very tall indolent Frenchman in uniform strolled up, so I pounced. "I think the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company have notified you regarding my passage to Rangoon?"

He smiled sweetly. "Oh, no, we have heard nothing. We never do," he added easily. "Sometimes passengers wait in

Hanoi a couple of months. But tell me, how is London looking?" Here he bunched his fingers and kissed them. "Three years I was at our office in the Haymarket, a delicious city, your London."

I was cross. "Where can I find out about my air passage?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps our office manager in the Rue Paul Bert can give you some information, but there is no hurry."

Grimly I heaved Charles into the waiting car. The gentleman who loved the Haymarket wasn't seeing the Far, Far East on five *piastres*.

The Metropole Hotel was large, crowded and so expensive to look at that I suffered renewed qualms. Courageously, however, I booked a room, led Charles up to his and left him, as I thought, to rest. Then I sallied forth to tackle Air France.

I feel sure I ought to have liked Hanoi. It was a place of wide tree-lined boulevards, of tropic parks, of gay shops filled with Parisian goods. Legionnaires swaggered along the pavements, pretty women walked delicately on Louis heels, gallant Frenchmen thronged the outdoor cafés. I hated it on sight. I wanted winding cobbled streets and spicy smells and the clack of *geta* and crowds of Chinese drifting along in their blue coats.

Little urchins beset my path clamouring for me to buy lacquered sharks, snakes of *papier mâché*, ivory elephants, paper fans, any and every sort of toy. Most ubiquitous they were and I kept tripping over them and their wares until I reached the Rue Paul Bert, where the other half of the infant population tried to sell me newspapers. There may be another city which possesses as many editions of as many newspapers as Hanoi; if so thank heaven I have not met it.

Air France offices were in process of rebuilding and five Annamites clung fly-wise to the ceiling dropping blobs of size on customers' heads. At the back, huddled over a ledger, sat a pale, languid Frenchman. "Are you the manager, please?"

He barely raised his head. I tried again, told him my name and business, asked when the next Imperial Airways plane passed through from Hong Kong.

"How should I know?" he demanded fretfully. "They tell me nothing!"

"But I cabled from Kunming."

"Ah, from China! A waste of good money. You had better cable again. In any case there is no hurry."

Nobody in Hanoi seemed to evince any desire for speed. I harangued the young man severely but he merely drooped farther over the ledger. "The bang-bang of these builders gives me a headache, Madame. No, I have no information about airplanes. Our own service is infrequent and Imperial Airways never take passengers from here as they carry too many Hong Kong mails. No, there are no ships. I wish there would be a war in Europe, then I could go home." His voice trailed off, and as I thought he might go to sleep at any moment I walked off, assuring him I should call again in the morning.

"You can call," he muttered, "but there will be no news. I never have any news for passengers."

I sat down at a café table and ordered some orangeade. The heat of Hanoi was such that I dripped, my capital was now four *piastres* forty, there was no British Consul nearer than Haiphong and I hadn't the price of my fare to that city, and I knew nobody in Hanoi. Something would have to be done, but the somnolence which apparently overtook those forced to live in this place was rapidly overtaking me. Suddenly I tasted death and pushed away the orangeade. The memory of Chungking was hard to conquer.

Wandering back to the hotel, I met the German pilot with a broad grin and a pair of bruised knuckles. "I beat 'em up all right, you come round and see!"

It was the only kick I got out of Hanoi. The Japanese Consulate presented a most curious appearance. All the ground-floor windows were smashed, broken furniture and bits of typewriters strewn the floors, in a far corner cowered two tiny Japanese, one nursing a smashed jaw and the other a fractured wrist. Nobody seemed to be doing anything about it—but then this was Hanoi.

At the entrance to the Metropole squatted several small Annamite boys with their opium outfits. "What are they here for?"

"Ah," said the pilot, "most people smoke here and it is simpler to have the boys come to the hotel."

A horrid thought assailed me. Asking the pilot to keep my drink for me, I bounded up the stairs and along to Charles' room.

A remarkable change had come over him. Instead of dragging himself towards me he walked upright, his face seemed to have filled out, his eyes were clearer, he looked years younger.

"How many pipes have you had?"

"Now, now, don't be so fussy. Only four and I feel so much better. Do you know what it was like in that damned hospital when I couldn't smoke?"

I sat down on a hard chair. "Of all the madness! Oh, I know you were a heavy smoker before you had pneumonia, but don't you realize what a weak state your heart is in, that your lungs are all wrong, that you're simply courting death?"

He examined his nails and smiled. "Forget about the nursing business. I am now going to show you Hanoi."

Down the stairs he marched as though nothing whatever was wrong with him. We had a cocktail with the pilot and waded through a seven-course dinner—at least Charles did by some miracle; I was still queasy about food. "And now mangosteens."

Those succulent fruits soothed me. I ate six and felt slightly better.

"Now you are going straight back to bed."

He grinned. "Not a bit of it, I am taking you round the night clubs of Hanoi."

I said viciously I refused to go without the pilot, who was inordinately pleased, "because the *spectacles* of Hanoi are famous!"

They may have been; all I remember is that they were slightly more revolting than the worst offered by Port Said, but Charles had got his head and there was no stopping him. We pranced in and out of rickshaws driven by Annamites on bicycles, we visited innumerable night-clubs, we drove round the lakes where the ladies in waiting of Hanoi solicited custom, we lost Charles no less than five times, and each time he had managed to smoke at least three more pipes.

My head ached violently and I felt about a hundred and one, and my mind kept reverting to China. She was only a few hundred miles away yet I felt I was separated from her by half the world. The others could not understand my preoccupation with such a loathsome, devastating country. "Why worry about her?" they said. "Look at her generals here, all enjoying themselves and forgetting their war."

That was true enough. Hanoi swarmed with high Chinese officers who sipped drinks in the cafés, crowded into the cabarets, thronged the hotels; swarmed also with Government officials and big business men come to arrange deals in munitions and other goods. But they were not the real China.

We reached the hotel about one and bade the pilot farewell, for he was off at dawn for Kunming. "Wait a moment," I pleaded. "If I write a note will you take it with you?"

I sat down and tried to scribble to Cass; but I couldn't find any words.

He was so fond of Hanoi. Desperately I wrote, "The mango-steens were very good," then crossed it out. "It doesn't matter," I told the pilot dully, "I'm too tired to write now."

He had just gone when a boy asked if I would go up to M. C—— as he was very sick.

It will be long before I forget that night in the Metropole Hotel. Not for five minutes at a time did I think Charles would live to see the morning. His opium indiscretions took their toll and he went from heart-attack to hæmorrhage, and from hæmorrhage to heart-attack with frightening celerity. A doctor came, left me some more digitalis and walked out saying there was nothing he could do. The manager came and said death was very bad for his hotel. The hall porter came and suggested a few more pipes of opium. The heat was terrific and the fan stopped work and the mosquitoes buzzed madly. And all the time Charles gasped he had to reach Saigon.

About seven o'clock I went for a bath, changed my clothes and tried to eat breakfast. When I got back to his room another of those horrid small boys was squatting on the mat with his pipe and tray, which I heaved downstairs with their owner after them. "I'm all right," said Charles querulously, "if you'd let me smoke I should feel quite well. Besides, I have an appointment with my boss this morning. He is staying in the hotel. If I don't keep it I shall lose my job, and I'm broke."

I locked him firmly into his room and descended in search of the unknown boss. He was pink and white, stout and cold-hearted.

"M. C—— is of no further use to me at all," he informed me. "I cannot have him back in Chungking since he cannot stand the climate. And I do not approve of his methods of living.

He used to smoke opium—well, that is all right in moderation but he carried it to excess. I have had a note from the French doctor in Chungking; he says he cannot live.”

“He is certainly very sick, but if he can get home to Saigon and be nursed by his wife maybe he will recover. Surely you could be kind enough to promise him some small job if and when he is better? It would make all the difference to him.”

“He is a dying man, Madame, and I am not a philanthropist. But let us share an *aperitif*?”

Over our cocktail he told me he was going back to Chungking in a few days’ time. “A terrible place,” he remarked smugly, “but one can make much money there at present. That is where C— is so foolish; he does not seize his opportunities. Look at him, forty-seven and dying penniless, bah!”

With difficulty I restrained myself from rudeness, but pleaded again for Charles. “He has a wife and two small children.”

“Yes, and a former wife who divorced him. No, Madame, but perhaps this evening you will accompany me to a cabaret?”

I rose stiffly, regretted my inability to accept his kind invitation and went upstairs again. Charles lay on the bed, panting for breath. “Look here, there is a train to Saigon this afternoon and you are travelling on it. Have you any money for your tickets?”

He nodded towards his coat. “In the wallet . . . just enough.”

But when I led him into the infero that was the Saigon train and realized he had to exist in it for over forty-eight hours my heart sank. “Are you sure you will be comfortable on your *courette*?”

“Of course, I am going home.”

As the train began to move he leaned from the window and thrust something into my hand. “It is all I have, but it may help you send a cable.”

I looked down. He had given me a twenty-*piastre* note. Wildly I ran alongside the train trying to hand it back to him, but he folded his arms and smiled. “We are both broke,” he said simply.

Kind Charles. Owing to war in Europe it was several months before I heard with thankfulness that he reached Saigon safely.

III

Looking after Charles had given me some much-needed occupation. It had also served to divert my confused mind from experiences too recent and too crowded for my immediate comprehension, but when I walked out of the station after seeing him off I felt utterly lonely. How did one leave a Far Eastern city when one had no money? I hadn't the least idea, but my mind held a vague notion one tramped. Yet how could one tramp across Indo-Chinese swamps or through Siamese jungles? Why, oh, why had I ever left China? People talked so much rubbish about her, said she made one feel entirely cut off from the rest of the world; but all around me in China had been friends, rare Chinese friends filled with kindness.

At that moment Hanoi chose to have its first air-raid rehearsal. Force of habit was too strong. The instant the sirens wailed I fell flat on my face in the middle of the elegant Rue Paul Bert. An astonished policeman picked me up, inquiring if I were injured, a crowd gathered, the toy-selling little boys were highly tickled. Dusty and furious I marched back to the Metropole, scowling at the Annamite belles with their awful black-lacquered teeth who wished to show me the *spectacles* of Hanoi and wishing passionately that some of the Chungking bombs could be diverted to this city.

Half an hour of sitting in the lounge brought me the knowledge that it was impossible for a lone female to avoid amorous attention in Hanoi, so I went up to my room and unlocked the typewriter. It was high time I rewrote the manuscript looted in Chungking.

All that afternoon I fingered the keys stupidly. My brain seemed paralyzed. I simply could not *remember* China, it was just a hotch-potch in my head. I couldn't have written of my Highway journey, of my stay in Kunming, of my visit to the city of desolation, and with dusk I gave up the hopeless task and lay down on my bed. I was so tired. My body was numb and my mind empty; my only consciousness that of the deadly sickness which had attacked me at intervals ever since leaving Chungking.

I did not sleep. Bits of the Chinese puzzle kept dancing before

my eyes, fading away, reappearing in maddening fashion. Maybe if the French clapped me into gaol for non-payment of my hotel bill I should be able to focus once more, see the vivid pattern which now eluded me? But then I wasn't sure. . . .

It must have been some twenty-four hours later I thought of the cactus. Unwrapping it carefully, I stood it on the little table beside my bed and lay gazing at its one red flower. Very, very slowly my mind thawed, became alive and within it the knowledge grew that China had definitely changed me. That sounded ridiculous; people of middle age did not alter their basic concept of living through a brief visit to a foreign country.

Yet I *had* altered and never again would I be as I had been before because the magic of China had caught and held me, shaken me, turned me topsy-turvy. Now under the glaring electric light the cactus blossom glowed, expanded, filled the hot room with a red haze on which tiny pieces of the puzzle kept appearing. The ruby hills of Yunnan, the black ramparts of Tibet, the silvery Salween valley, the foaming rosininess of Mikiang. . . .

I propped myself on one elbow and stared intently—at least I had got the Chinese background back, and against it moved shadowy figures. There was little Miss Wei peeling *lichees* in the Lashio *dak* bungalow, saying in her strangely raucous voice that she “knew so little”; there was gentle Mr. Wang of the harassed face and the sad smile; there was the golden-skinned Sawbwa of Mangshih; there was a long procession of Chinese, young and old, rich and poor, and as they passed across the red background they reminded me of all I had learnt from each one. Dr. Ling with his heroic toil against disease, the tiny nurse who had walked across the mountains from her brief honeymoon, “All the fun in the world” and his mocking denunciations of Chinese policy, the ancient priest with the mummified head who wanted the works of that “fairly recent” writer, Josephus, the bereaved woman with her brown berry face and her hired wailers, Wong Han-min with his discourses on American films, Chinese verse and excellent chow.

The procession seemed endless. There were the little nigger boys, the engineer we had left in Chu'Hsuing, the Corporal with his flute-cum-piccolo, all the folk with whom I had travelled, laughed and argued. And dominating the Chinese

scene were the two who had helped me most, Joe Chow and Ching.

Ching was the more important. I couldn't exactly tell why for it had been Joe who had borne the burden of the day and guided me from Lashio to far Kunming, answered my multitudinous questions, explained the customs of his country; yet I knew beyond any doubt that it was Ching who counted most, his companionship which had altered me out of all recognition.

But this mental coming alive again was a painful, struggling process, and even as I studied the pock-marked face of Ching it grew fainter, and as clouds pass across a crystal so greyness drifted over the Chinese background. I put out my hand and touched the cactus; it remained exactly what it was, a tiny plant in a ceramic pot. Then my finger brushed the earth in which it was planted and for a second I knew China's secret.

Tossing on my bed that night, I tried vainly to work the thing out. There was some part of it which dated from Lashio, and another part I had learnt from the San Francisco Chinese in Lungling, and a third, vitally important part which had to do with the birth of the child in the Chungking air-raid. But I could not piece the parts together and fell into that horrid state which is neither sleep nor wakefulness. "Red mud of Yunnan", I kept repeating to myself. "Yellow dust of Szechwan." "The cactus always flowers." There seemed no sense in those phrases, yet somewhere was a connection linking them together and it was terrifically important I found it. With sudden energy I rose, bathed, dressed and walked downstairs at 6 a.m. to demand breakfast of an amazed night porter.

The breakfast undid me completely, for my Chungking sickness returned, bringing with it a sense of repulsion against all things Chinese.

IV

The truth was, I suppose, that the horrors I had witnessed in the city of desolation had temporarily deprived me of my faculties. Anyway, my mood of running away from memory of China persisted and I simply allowed Hanoi apathy to take possession of me. "What," asked Charles' abominable boss in a fruity whisper, "are your conclusions about China?"



I fled.

"And did Madame reside in the magnificent Hotel du Lac in Kunming?" the manager wanted to know.

I shook my head dumbly and wandered out into the sunlight. Why couldn't people leave me alone in my wretchedness? Why did they have to remind me of what I wished to forget?

Late one evening there was a knock on my door. I opened it and a voice said, "My God, it is you? I saw your name in the book and couldn't believe it. What the devil are you doing here?"

I clutched the owner of the voice and dragged him under the light. "Oh, B——, are you *real*?"

"Sure. I had to do a night-stop here on my way up to Hong Kong because of bad weather. Now what's the trouble?"

"Take me out of here! I've been in China, but never mind about that, just take me away."

B—— was very brisk and efficient. "Remember Joe? Well, he's coming through in the morning and will pick you up. I'll wireless him when I start at dawn. Look here, have you dined?"

"No, I'm not very hungry these days."

"Rubbish, come along!"

Half an hour later he said anxiously maybe I'd better see a doctor.

"Yes, yes, but in Rangoon, not here." For some odd reason I had developed an insane desire to reach Rangoon. I should be safe there among normal people, and perhaps I could even try to explain to H——, who knew China so well, a little of what I felt about her—or did not wish to feel.

"How's the old war going up there?" asked B—— casually.

I gulped two mouthfuls of champagne before I answered deliberately, "I don't know."

But that night I slept dreamlessly for the first time in many nights. By eight o'clock next morning an apologetic Air France had informed me my passage was in order, by ten I was seated in a car waiting to be driven to the airport.

Suddenly a lively small American popped out of nowhere. "You flying down to Bangkok?"

"Yes."

He frowned. "Well, you're liable to disappointment. This
i.e.

is one hell of a place to get away from, you know. I've been waiting for three weeks."

Fear gnawed at me. If there should be a catch in this business of leaving Hanoi I just couldn't stand it. "I'm sure it is all right," I said bravely.

"M'm, maybe it'll turn out O.K. I've raised Cain about my passage for there is important business waiting for me in Rangoon."

The fear niggled all the way to the airport. This man was obviously an important person, he had waited three weeks, the planes carried a great deal of mail and had little room for passengers. We climbed out of the car and sat down on cane chairs, eyeing each other a shade warily. We smoked cigarettes and drank *limonade gaseuse* and watched the ground staff playing their inevitable card games, but there was no sign of a plane. Two hours we stayed in those chairs, and I was almost a mental case before we heard the drone of the D.H. 86. Towards our veranda strode a familiar Australian figure and, regardless of my companion's feelings, I rushed forward. "Joe, you *will* take me, won't you?"

The American was rightly furious. "I also am travelling on this plane. Indeed, if it's a question of leaving one of us behind, then I fear it must be the lady. I have no wish to be impolite, Madam"—here he bowed stiffly—"but you have not waited three weeks."

Joe was immensely regretful. "I'm sorry, sir, there's a relief coming down later on to-day. You can travel by her."

Pandemonium reigned. I knew I ought to give up my seat to this poor wretch who had urgent affairs in Rangoon, but I stood mutely and listened to the row. Another hour in Hanoi would utterly destroy my reason.

"Come along," said Joe's voice, and meekly I followed him to the machine. "You're the only passenger but I'm sorry Hong Kong went nuts this morning and gave us six breakfasts instead of three and three lunches. Where have you been since I saw you in Khartoum? You must have lost about a stone."

I sat down just behind the cockpit and closed my eyes. "In hell," I answered.

I did not bother to open them to glance back at Hanoi as we circled the city, but a little later I made a beeline for the breakfast

boxes, drank two cups of soup and demolished four hard-boiled eggs straight off. Most peculiarly, the food did not taste of death.

Joe came aft. "It's going to be a rough trip, rotten weather all the way. Whatever we do we can't steer clear of storms."

"Nothing worries me," I replied drowsily and went to sleep, not to awaken until we were bucketing over the Siamese border.

The weather certainly was behaving badly. It rained and blew and thundered, it tossed us across the sky like a shuttlecock, the jungly gorges far below were scored with the long blue tongues of lightning. Joe made a superb landing at Udorn, where we had to refuel, and we staggered into the stuffy shed where an American girl was examining the spurious embroidery placed on a table for sale by an optimistic Siamese. "Say," she demanded, "isn't it true the funny little men here are changing the name of their country from Siam to something else?"

"Yes, they call it Thailand now."

"My," she puckered her brows. "I guess they're calling it Toyland because of all the elephants."

That remark restored my normality more completely than anything which had happened to me since leaving China. I laughed so much I had to rest my head on the embroideries.

The American girl was slightly resentful. Doubtless she thought me barmy. "Where you been, China? My, I couldn't stand that! My Pop says it's an awful dirty country. Me and my girl-friend were going right round the globe by air, but she took sick in Calcutta so I'm on my own now. Well, there's my pilot beckoning. I guess that Toyland name's real cute."

Joe regarded me severely. "Why don't *you* go round the globe by air? Do you a darn sight more good than roughing it in the outlandish places you always choose. Honestly, you look fearfully ill and sort of dazed, not a bit like yourself."

We bucketed on over the dark Siamese mountains, dropped to the endless paddy-fields and Bangkok, that city of temples dreaming by the sluggish Menam river. All I wanted was to retire to bed and try to make up some more sleep, but Joe was so concerned about my apathy that I weakly agreed to visit the Hi Tin Lo, that enchanting night-club where the daintiest little Siamese girls imaginable revolve solemnly on a perfect floor, and

there we met several of Joe's friends who insisted we should accompany them first to some place full of rather amorous White Russians and then to some other party.

Sitting dumbly in a corner, I heard Joe remark, "Can't think what's come over her. She used to be a damned amusing person," and suddenly I wanted to tell him how China held me in thrall against my will. I even got so far as to open my mouth, then I closed it again. He would look kindly at me and suggest a doctor as B—— had done.

"To-morrow," I said firmly to an unknown next to me, "I shall be in Rangoon."

His expression was a trifle bewildered. "I have heard," he replied courteously, "it is a pleasant city?"

"Not really. I prefer Chungking."

He edged away at that. "But there are air-raids there, and then the Chinese . . ."

"Five hundred people blown up by one bomb," I said brutally. "Arms, legs and what have you all over the place. Drowned lepers and starving refugees and little boys sweeping entrails into buckets and a child born in the yellow Szechwan sand . . ." I stopped abruptly. I had felt fiercely convinced this innocuous individual next to me should know the tragedy of Chungking, but why had I mentioned that baby again? Somewhere at the back of my mind was the thought: the baby, yellow sand, red mud, the serenity of China—they're all linked up.

V

Driving back to the Trocadero Hotel Joe lectured me. "See here, you're crazy to make Rangoon on the morning's flying-boat. I mean, you're definitely ill and it would be far better to stay here and see a good doctor."

"Don't fuss so," I snapped, then felt contrite. "Sorry, Joe, your friend thought I was nuts and maybe he was right. No, I'll go on in the morning, I'm still too near China."

Sitting next an engineer I knew in the flying-boat I forgot my terror of Chungking memories and my intolerable ache for China started all over again. I struggled to tell the engineer a particle of what I felt about the country, but he smiled nicely

and suggested I have a drink and a sandwich. "After all, it's a lousy country," he finished comfortably.

I nibbled my sandwich and put it down again. The taste of death had come back.

The Glaswegians greeted me heartily. They had never thought to see me again for China was such a god-forsaken place these days, and then that mad journey of mine across the Highway in the rains, alone with the Chinese . . . I smiled mechanically, explained the bedding was coming round by sea from Hanoi, and crawled into the hotel.

That caravanserai was just the same. The hour was noon and people sipped pink gins, and it was a Saturday, so in the evening they would put on their boiled shirts and visit the English Club. They said: "Hallo, are you back?" or "You don't look too fit", or "Aren't you ever sorry you went to China?" As I scanned the lounge for H—— I tried to tell them my one regret was that I had left China, but they looked politely disbelieving and proceeded to give me the latest news.

Did I know twelve Blenheim bombers had passed over the city last week en route for Singapore? Had I heard how the Japanese wished to invade Siam and hack their way through to Burma? Wasn't it dreadful the way the Government were commandeering liners? What about the latest European crisis, would it be a second Munich or was it really war this time?

War? If they wanted to know anything about war let them go to Chungking. Turning on my heel, I walked to the desk. "Is H—— Sahib in?"

The clerk beamed, gave me my old room and shook his head. "H—— Sahib has gone to the races, Madame."

I swung the room key from one finger and stared at him. Something snapped inside of me. You came back from China bursting to tell somebody about what ought, must be done for that tortured land, and the only person in Rangoon who had any real knowledge of her had gone to the races!

Upstairs the old Madrassi bearer who had waited on me before unpacked my case. "The Memsahib's dresses are very dirty, see they are all spattered with red mud. Never mind, the laundry will soon get them white again."

I kicked the pile of silk with my foot. "Yes," I answered, "but then white is the colour of sorrow in China."

"Oh!" He gazed at me aghast and scuttled away like a frightened rabbit. I lay down on my bed and went to sleep. I had reached Rangoon. I was far away from China—and I wanted desperately to go back.

Later H—— and I sat in the lounge. He said, "They shouldn't have let you cross the Highway, shouldn't have let you go to Chungking."

"I would go again to-morrow. Some day I'll get my wish. Don't you understand that through my journey I learnt how to touch the fringe of Chinese philosophy?"

"I know you wrote me you had fallen in love with the Chinese en masse and that I simply cannot understand and never will. How's the war going anyway?"

"China is bound to win."

"H'm, I wouldn't be too sure about that. She's desperately short of cash, makes gross errors, hasn't sufficient mechanization, can't train her soldiers."

"Ah, but those things make no difference in that unorthodox war. China remains unconquerable; what is more, some day she is going to rise."

"Are you trying to put your Red views across on me?" demanded H——, but just then two Chinese friends came up to greet me, for there was a dance in the hotel that evening in aid of China's War Funds and all of their race in Rangoon had rallied to this noble cause. We spoke of the blockade of Hong Kong, of the propaganda put out by the Japanese concerning the number of Chinese planes they had shot down, of the New Life Movement and of the restoration of the Empire under a Chiang Kai-shek dynasty.

Presently they began discussing trade matters with H—— and I sat watching the scene at the far end of the lounge, where the Chinese bowed and danced and ate ices and appeared very immaculate in their evening kit. It was exceedingly queer, but behind the glittering robes of the women and the black and white dress of the men moved a shuffling procession of bent, blue-clad figures. Their faces were expressionless, the red mud splashed their thin yellow limbs, the clothes hung in rags from their shoulders. I heard the thudding of the guns and the screams of the falling bombs and the blue-clad figures suddenly disintegrated into a thousand tiny pieces which resolved themselves

again into the pock-marked face of Ching. Just for an instant I saw the Chinese puzzle complete. Aloud I said rapidly, "From a man such as my driver across the Highway will spring the true future of China, not from those intellectuals dancing so happily over there. Hundreds of years it will take, perhaps, for her to gain freedom, but one day she will rise and she will hold such serenity of spirit that one will be dazzled when one looks at her."

There was an awkward silence. The Chinese rose, bowed and departed. H—— leant forward. "Whatever is wrong? Don't you think . . . ?"

"I know," I interrupted fiercely, "why don't I see a doctor? My good man, I simply can't make you realize that far from making me sick China has cured me, given me humility of mind." I paused; the Chinese puzzle had gone to pieces once more. "I'll never hold it," I thought wildly, then I turned to H——. "Cass told me to get right away from China before I wrote about her. He said I wouldn't gain a true perspective until I looked back at her from a great distance. But how long will I have to wait?"

And because H——, like Cass, only criticized China to hide his love for her, he answered, "Maybe months, maybe years. But you'll get your reward, one always does where China is concerned. Meantime I should leave the puzzle alone for a time. Now let us talk about the Highway."

I beamed at him. It had been the knowledge that H—— also had travelled the Highway which had lured me back to Rangoon, and as we spoke of Er-Hai lake, of the temple of the zodiac and of Salween river I felt again the curious intangible bond which drew together those who had journeyed from Lashio to Kunming.

Only when I left for England ten days later did we allude again to the Chinese puzzle. "Let me know when you discover China's secret," he said.

"Yes," I promised, "I'll let you know."

Chapter Fourteen

THE CACTUS ALWAYS FLOWERS

I

I ARRIVED home to the outbreak of war in Europe and the eight thousand miles which separated me from China were suddenly increased. Letters took months to travel there, news of China's war dwindled to odd small paragraphs, the country was as remote as the moon.

Rather grimly I sat down to type this book. Even Cass had surely never visualized how far away from China I should be such a short time after leaving her. All I possessed to remind me of her was a cactus in a pot and a handful of tragic memories—not much to build upon. Yet each morning a fresh piece of the puzzle fell into place and this time it remained.

Staring at the cactus planted in its reddish soil, I wondered how I could have been so stupid as to miss the links connecting it with Lashio, with the San Francisco Chinese in Lungling and with the child born in the Chungking raid. These four things were the big beads in the Chinese rosary.

My mind went back to Lashio, to the day when I had felt that if I put my hand on the rough red surface of the Highway I should feel the beat of China's heart. So ignorant had I been at the time I had not realized the significance of that feeling, and all my journey I seemed to have stumbled blindly past clues which now stuck out a mile. Who was it had said to me, "I am one of the few Chinese who cannot press my face to the red earth and draw all serenity from her"? "All the fun in the world" surely, as we stood in the ruined temple of Pao Shan looking down on the moonlit city. And how many times had the dormouse and others explained to me the Chinese worship of family and land?

Now I saw clearly that my desire to lay my hand on the surface of Sun Yat Sen's vision had been practically the only right feeling I had known for China until after I had left her,

for the red mud of Yunnan, the yellow dust of Szechwan were inextricably bound up with the age-old philosophy which kept the Chinese serene. They belonged to the earth, these people, and the simplicity of their faith in it was immense. The driver from San Francisco had been right when he said the secret of Chinese serenity was closely guarded, but having experienced love for the Highway I should have understood I was even then half-way towards penetrating that guard.

And the child in Chungking? Looking back I realized that when it squirmed in my lap I had at last got close to China, for it was right a Chinese child should be born on the earth, that its limbs should be smothered in yellow dust almost before it had drawn breath. War had killed its mother, yet I felt sure that in her dumb way she had sensed through her agony the knowledge she was giving her land another life in exchange for her own, helping China to remain unconquerable.

Anything might happen in the world, wars, disasters, monstrous upheavals; none of these things could destroy the essential tranquillity of a country where people drew all healing from the soil. I remembered coolies seen in paddy-fields, coolies bearing salt-loads, coolies swaggering off to war in tin helmets. Desolate as their lives had seemed to me they had no feeling of unhappiness because each man of them worshipped his father first and beyond that the land which had borne him.

Such a beautiful, fierce land too. Laughing one moment and cruel the next; gentle as a mother and subtle as a snake, a bewildering, fascinating land of violent contrasts, a land which demanded incredible sacrifices from its children then, as reward, showed them beauty so vivid that they fell down and pressed their cheeks against it.

Creeds did not really flourish in China; they never had done for the base of the Chinese religion was the land, and while the Japanese war had certainly knit the provinces into a single loose yet rather holey garment, the germ of unity had lain dormant through the ages because all men shared in love of the land. Joe Chow, Miss Wei, Ching, even the golden Sawbwa of Mangshih held that common emotion, whatever queer modernities they had superimposed upon it.

Love of the land was responsible for so many things the meaning of which had eluded me. It explained the wild anger

of the Chinese when it was suggested mining operations might be started in Yunnan Province, the indifference to physical suffering and death—for it had inured them to the former and there was naught to fear in the latter when it meant only that your tired body returned to rest in the soil from which it had sprung, the appreciation of loveliness of flower, or tree, or mountain, or river which existed in the mind of the humblest coolie.

II

So the Chinese puzzle fell into place, and as I studied it I forgot much of the tragedy I had seen, remembered only the sense of friendliness which had wrapped me around like a cloak. Even in Chungking they had been friendly people, and again I felt all humility for if I had had to endure one-tenth of their trials I should have lost all pretensions to humanity.

But above and beyond kindness and serenity was something harder to define, something which seemed to be stirring the peoples of China as lightly as the summer wind stirs a field of grain. Since earliest times the mass of the coolies had been content to work their paddy-field, to eat if the rice cropped well and to starve if it did not; but now they were lifting their heads and fixing their eyes on a far goal—freedom. The days of the Mandarins had gone and their power had crumbled into decay, and up in Chungking stood a man with a sad, fine face who was determined to carry on the revolution begun by Sun Yat Sen.

In China I had believed salvation would come to her people through Chiang Kai-shek; now I understood that while he could fire them by his idealism real freedom, real unity could only come from the people themselves. It would spring from deep within them, thrust its way to the surface of their minds as the red blossoms of the cactus thrust through the spiky leaves, and it would hold the ageless, unconquerable serenity of China.

It would spring, in short, from men like Ching, as I had announced to a startled audience in Rangoon, and through it peace would come at last to four hundred million people.

Like the cactus China would always flower.

THE END.

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